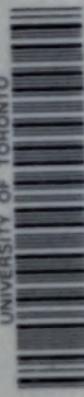


# A LADY OF THE SALONS

## D.E. ENFIELD

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARIES



3 1761 01789974 1

75



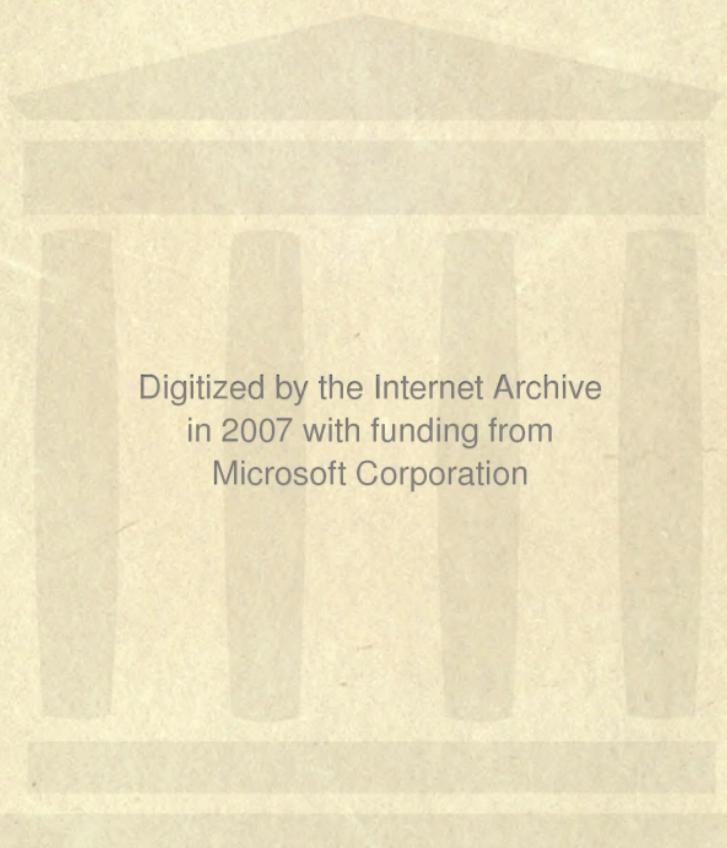
*Presented to the*  
**LIBRARY of the**  
**UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO**  
*by*

Sybille Pantazzi

87 Jan. 1966  
Toronto



A Lady of the Salons  
Louise Colet



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2007 with funding from  
Microsoft Corporation





Louise Colet

*From a portrait in the Bibliothèque Nationale*

A Lady of the Salons  
The Story of Louise Colet  
*by* D. E. Enfield



Jonathan Cape  
Eleven Gower Street, London

*First published 1922*

*All rights reserved*

PQ  
2209  
C6 Z59  
1922

OCT  
1  
1925

*Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner, Frome and London*

TO  
R. R. E.



## Preface

THE original impulse to the writing of this sketch came from Flaubert's correspondence, in which Louise Colet appears as Madame X, and a more sympathetic figure than in either these or her own pages. The latter are the fullest and often the only source of information about her. From M. Mestral de Combremont's monograph, *La belle Madame Colet, une déesse des Romantiques*, I have gathered many useful references.



## Contents

1. DÉBUT . . . . .	11
2. FLAUBERT'S MISTRESS . . . . .	49
3. "LUI" . . . . .	71
4. TRAVELS IN ITALY . . . . .	101
5. THE END . . . . .	127
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	159



## I : DÉBUT

MOST of the associations called up by the name of Louise Colet (to those few for whom her name has any association at all) are ludicrous—the innumerable stories circulated by Flaubert and his friends about her pursuing him into restaurants and railway stations and being ejected by waiters and porters—the knife which hung for years in Alphonse Karr's hall above the inscription “*Presenté par Mme Colet 1840—dans le dos,*”—above all, Maxime du Camp's epitaph, “*Ici gît celle qui a compromis Victor Cousin, ridiculisé Alfred de Musset, vilipendé Gustave Flaubert et tenté d'assassiner Alphonse Karr. Requiescat in pace.*” All these have helped to send her down to posterity as a woman who elbowed her way into a literary society to which she did not belong, and who, having made a nuisance of herself there for some years, was pushed out again with well-merited contempt—pushed out, but not before she had contrived to involve in some ridiculous or humiliating episode all those who had had anything to do with her. Such appears Louise Colet's part in life now that the curtain has been rung down on it. But those who watched the earlier half of the

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

performance, and Mme Colet herself during the whole of it, saw her rôle in a very different light.

Louise Revoil, the future Mme Colet, was born in Lyons in 1810. Her father was a drawing master in a secondary school; her mother the dowerless daughter of a small landowner. Whether a young lady's passion for a handsome teacher had led to a runaway marriage, or whether her father considered that he could not do better for his daughter, is uncertain; anyhow, it was generally considered that Mme Revoil had married beneath her. Louise herself is always silent about her antecedents on her father's side, but gives the fullest information about her mother's. Her maternal grandmother came from Arles, and might have sat for a model to Phidias. She had been the intimate friend of many of the most brilliant men of the ancien régime—and had helped bishops and noblemen to escape during the Revolution. She lived in an ancestral château in Provence, where Louise sometimes said that she was born and brought up. Her memory was vague however about her childhood and her family. As she grew older her mother's ancestors grew grander—and so rapidly did the number of their châteaux and of their distinguished friends increase that many of Mme Colet's acquaintances refused to believe in them at all.

Anyhow, with the exception of occasional visits

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

to her grandmother in the country, there is little doubt that Louise spent her girlhood in Lyons in such circumstances, and in such society as is usual to the families of assistant masters in provincial schools. She was a pretty child with long fair hair, bright blue eyes, a high colour, and features regular though perhaps a trifle doll-like. She was a healthy, noisy, rampageous child—a trifle vain, a trifle spoilt, subject to screaming fits when crossed, full of pretty coaxing ways when she had got her own will, or hoped to get it—a complete egoist and the light of her parents' eyes—in fact a perfectly ordinary little girl. As she grew older however she began to attract attention among her father's friends and neighbours. She did not lose her good looks, and about her fourteenth year her rather doll-like prettiness began to develop into something quite dazzling. She was never a very interesting or *spirituelle* beauty, but the full curves of her figure a trifle precociously developed, her long silky curls, her bright blue eyes, her brilliant pink and white complexion and full red lips, and her high spirits made a *tout ensemble* to which it was impossible for any man to remain indifferent. Louise began early to realize her charms. She rolled her blue eyes, chose frocks and ribbons which would best bring out their forget-me-not colour, scented her handkerchiefs—and in spite of her mother's warning that it would spoil her

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

complexion, and also that it was quite unnecessary, touched up the pink and white of her cheeks with rouge and powder. She began to have admirers. Mysterious bouquets appeared in her place at church, and on her plate at Christmas and Valentine's Day. A consumptive young man was noticed hanging about the bridge which she crossed on her way to and from school in the hopes of catching a glimpse of her. An auctioneer's clerk actually proposed for her.

But though she enjoyed these triumphs to the full, and in spite of her pink cheeks and her high spirits, Louise was not happy. Her old screaming fits began to be replaced by floods of tears in her bedroom and shrugs of the shoulders and sullen silences downstairs. These were interwoven with nerve-shattering scenes with her mother. She began to read ravenously, adaptations of old romances, *Paul et Virginie*, Scott, Byron, first in translations, then in English which she learnt for the purpose. She took to writing verses—facile and flowing with that spreading voluptuousness which was inherent in the very stuff of her mind and body. She lived a great part of her time in a dream-world furnished by Sir Walter Scott and the imagination of a sensuous adolescence. Dressed in the costume of a great variety of periods, but always in soft velvets and brilliant silks, Louise went through the triumphs

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

and misfortunes common to ladies of high degree in fiction. Sometimes she was rescued from vague but mortal danger by a passionate though taciturn knight, and carried swooning in his arms through the vast halls and corridors of a mediæval castle. Sometimes the knight himself was in danger—and rescued by the daring and wit of Louise herself. Having saved his life she nursed him back to health in a woodman's hut far from all the world, sitting for hours on the ground at his side feeling his faint heart flutter beneath her white hand. Sometimes there were many knights who fought each other in duels and tournaments, all for one glance from the blue eyes of Louise, a ribbon from her breast, a rose let fall from her hand, while she would have none of them, but sat aloof toying with her spaniel, jesting with her women, while hearts and heads were broken like egg-shells around her. Sometimes, but more rarely, she loved in vain, and sat alone in her tower, pale with the pangs of unrequited love, and sang songs at the beauty and pathos of which the pages in the courtyard below were moved to sympathetic tears. As she grew older her phantasies became less mediæval and more Parisian, until at last the scene of her triumphs was transferred permanently to the Faubourg S. Germain. She still caused duels, swooned in the arms of her lovers, and nursed them through dangerous illnesses, but

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

her lovers now were generally men of genius—who admired her poems, read her their own works in manuscript—and turned surfeited with the applause of an infatuated but uncomprehending populace to lay their laurels at the feet of the more discerning Louise.

It was a steep descent from these airy regions to the dingy little living-room where M. Revoil was reading the paper, and steeper still to the kitchen where Mme Revoil was making jam and scolding the servant. The sordid economies of her own home, the provincial society, the absence of all those luxuries and refinements which she felt to be her birth-right weighed upon Louise's spirits. She felt herself infinitely superior to her surroundings, yet saw no way of escaping from them. Why should she trouble to shine before schoolmasters, clerks and shopkeepers ? It was easy enough to dazzle them and make them fall in love with her—but she would not marry any of them. That would be to follow in her mother's steps, and set up another dreary little establishment at Lyons like that from which it was her determination to escape. Yet whom else could she marry ? She felt that she could only be happy with a man of culture, talent, eminence even—a man who would understand the vague longings of her heart and awaken it to ecstasies yet undreamed of—a man who would give her the place she felt

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

to be her due among elegant women and men of letters—yet whom she would look at with pride in any society, however distinguished. Yet such a man—even if she could contrive to meet him—would be certain to expect a large “dot” with his wife, and it was all that poor M. Revoil could do to keep his own little household going—there was nothing left for Louise. So she lingered on year after year in Lyons, reading romances, writing poetry, crying her eyes out, flirting with and then rejecting bank clerks and school-teachers, attempting to help her mother and the servant, but making more work than she did, and doing very little good to herself or anyone else. By the time she had reached her twenty-sixth year the position had begun to be serious. Young ladies soon became old maids in 1830, and though Louise was constantly being “talked about,” there seemed no prospect of her being married.

It was at this critical point in her history that M. Colet, a younger colleague of M. Revoil, was appointed professor of Harmony in the Conservatoire of Paris. When he called to announce his good fortune he proposed for Louise. He was certainly not the hero of her dreams. He was musical of course, but Louise did not in the least care for music, and his talents were not of an eminence to make them interesting to his wife whatever her individual

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

tastes. He was not handsome, nor virile; in fact he was extremely delicate with a tendency to consumption which became more marked as the years went on. He was not rich—his income would be very little larger than her father's—but then he did not expect a dowry. The society in which he had moved hitherto had been the same as that of the Revoils—but then he was going to Paris. Anyhow, Louise accepted him. With all her communicativeness about herself and her own affairs she is very reserved about her husband. Her friends and biographers taking their cue from her never seem to think him worth much attention. Maxime du Camp says that he was a very nice man, devoted to music. Beranger occasionally made efforts to get him pupils. But for the rest he seems to have been a nonentity. Exactly why Louise married him is not known. Perhaps at the beginning her heart was touched by the delicate musical young man who wanted her so desperately and whose very life seemed to hang upon her answer, so that she mistook him for one brief moment for the hero of her dreams. Perhaps he caught her at a time when the dislike of Lyons and her own home was uppermost. Perhaps the bait of Paris was more than she could resist. Anyhow, in 1836 they were married and came to Paris.

Whatever reason Louise may have had for marrying she was bitterly disappointed. The gentle,

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

sickly music teacher had no power over her mind or heart—or more serious still, over her temperament. Louise's voluptuous southern nature was roused and irritated but never satisfied by her husband. She soon realized that it was no use pretending to be in love with him.

She was even more bitterly disappointed in Paris. She had to learn what every metropolitan knows and what no provincial believes—that there is no special potency in a capital as a mere geographical unit. That without connexions, a certain amount of money, and the determination and ability to make use of both, it is as impossible for an inhabitant of the very centre of Paris to mix in Parisian society as it is for the grocer, schoolmaster or local practitioner of Lyons. The Colets did not ever live in the heart of Paris but in a distant suburb on the left bank of the Seine—in a small flat in the Rue de Sèvres. They had an income equivalent to about £300 a year. Occasionally Louise would take a jolting horse-bus (there were cabs but she could not afford them) into the heart of Paris and look at the elegant dresses in the shop windows or on the ladies walking with their cavaliers or driving in the Champs Elysées. But she could not afford to buy them and the dressmaker of the Rue de Sèvres was no more skilful at making them than the one at Lyons. Occasionally Louise's husband would take her to a

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

theatre, but the long standing for cheap seats, followed as likely as not by standing through the whole play, the journey back at night in the bus, or if the last bus had gone, on foot, made the expedition one not to be lightly undertaken, to say nothing of the hole it made in the money available to meet the weekly housekeeping bills. For the rest the Colets lived in dreary seclusion, Louise's only society being her neighbours in the Rue de Sèvres and the people her husband brought home. These of course were his colleagues at the Conservatoire, and very much like the colleagues whom her father used to bring home. While they discussed the value of the tonic sol-fa system, the eccentricities of their chief or the technique of some new pianist, Louise and their wives discussed the relative merits of the suburban shopkeepers, the morals of their neighbours and the delinquencies of their servants. Meanwhile, thought Louise, Rachel played to a crowded house, exquisite ladies, better dressed but not so good looking as Louise herself, glided over polished floors on the arms of their cavaliers. Famous men read aloud their yet unpublished works to hushed and crowded salons, politicians whispered state secrets into ears no prettier and far less intelligent than Louise's own. And she was as far from it all as she had been at Lyons, shut away in a dreary suburb with a wretched income, an insignificant husband and no society, her

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

heart unawakened, her beauty unappreciated, her talents lying idle.

For two years Louise lived thus—disappointed and unhappy, but not daunted. She had meant to come to Paris, and she had come. She had meant to enjoy Paris, and she would enjoy it. But how? Her husband was no use. There was nothing to be gained from him or his friends. Louise must find a way for herself—turn her own gifts to account. The gift which had always seemed to Louise the most remarkable was her facility in writing verses. This, more than her good looks, her high spirits or her mother's gentility, had distinguished her among the young ladies of Lyons. Hardly any of them had written verses and Louise was always writing them. So she sorted out the best, sent them to the editors of such periodicals as came in her way. They were returned. She wrote new ones and they met with the same fate. Some came back with a printed slip, some with a polite note, others never came back at all. None were accepted. Louise stood outside the city looking up at the walls which seemed too high for her to scale. Then quite suddenly the drawbridge was lowered, the gates were flung open, and amazed but triumphant she swept in.

In 1838 one of the professors at the Conservatoire told her that the Académie Française was offering a prize of 2,000 francs for a poem on the Museum of

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

Versailles, and half jocularly asked her why she did not go in for it. Louise did not laugh. She eagerly inquired when it had to be given in ; even the reply “In five days’ time” did not daunt her. Rather it spurred her on. She shut herself in her room, put on her dressing-gown, let down her hair and began to write. De Mirecourt in his flattering little notice of her says that she felt at this moment “passer sur son front le souffle inspirateur.” Louise herself says that she was spurred on by grim necessity and the hope of winning the prize of 2,000 francs. Anyhow, in less than five days the poem was ready and sent off. It was a metrical history of Versailles written from a republican point of view. The following lines are fairly representative :—

“ Louis Quatorze roi suprême  
Le revetit de cette embleme  
En s’écriant, ‘L’état c’est moi  
Et la France qui me contemple  
Comme à Dieu l’on battit un temple  
Doit bâtir un temple a son roi ! ’

Il dit et Versailles s’élève  
Ansi que le palais d’un rêve,” etc., etc.

It would not have been any better if she had taken fifty, or even five hundred days, to write it. Louise

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

was not one to pick and choose her words. She never wrote or spoke any except the first which came into her head. Anyhow, her poem, in the opinion of the Académie Française, was better than any other of the forty-nine which were sent in, and it was awarded the prize. It was a solid triumph, the approval of the most learned body in Europe, won in open competition and backed by the sum of 2,000 francs. It was not, of course, dazzling. Such prizes were given frequently by the Académie, and the subjects set and the conditions of the competition were not such as to attract writers of established reputation. To most women it would have meant a few new dresses, the payment of some outstanding debts, and perhaps a corner of some hitherto recalcitrant magazine for her poems. Louise saw that it marked that turn in the tide of her affairs for which she had waited so long in vain. She took it at the flood and floated full into the haven of her dreams.

She got hold of a list of the members of the Académie who had acted as judges, put on her best hat, hired a cab and set out to call upon them in turn to thank them for their kindness. Her first visit was to Royer Collard, a distinguished philosopher—a former professor at the Sorbonne. He received her visit with the heavy but playful deference which handsome young women generally inspire in elderly professors. Her verses were

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

charming. Now that he saw the writer he understood how it was, and so on. He was delighted that she had won the prize—but he must not take all the glory. He did not think he would be giving away State secrets if he said that one of her most enthusiastic supporters had been no less a person than Victor Cousin. What prompted him to say this? Was he merely embarrassed by the storm of expectant gratitude and anxious to divert it to broader shoulders? Was he paying off some old score in shunting a tiresome visitor on to his colleague? Did intimate knowledge of Cousin's tastes lead him to suppose that a visit from the flamboyant poetess would not be unwelcome? Anyhow, whether malicious or good natured, his chance words were of far greater importance than he foresaw. Louise at once directed her cab to the Sorbonne, where she asked for Cousin. She was shown into a luxurious suite of private rooms, shut away from the rest of the building by heavy doors, lined from floor to ceiling with books, overlooking a quiet garden. The great man rose from his desk, pale, distinguished, interesting, with deep-set eyes, long silky hair and cleft chin. The authority of the professor, the aloofness of the scholar was tempered with the suavity born of long intercourse with society. Unlike his colleague he showed no anxiety to pass on his visitor—in fact, for a busy man he kept her a very long time. When

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

they parted he arranged another meeting a few days hence. Within a month Louise had become his mistress.

It was an amazing conquest—one of which Mme le Recamier herself might have been proud. Cousin in 1838, in his forty-seventh year, was a philosopher with a world-wide reputation. He was the greatest French exponent of Plato and practically the only French exponent of Kant and Hegel. He was the intimate friend of Mill and Austin, the only contemporary French philosopher whose name was familiar in the great schools of England and Germany. In France he was not merely *the* philosopher but a member of the Académie Française, of the Académie des Sciences, Morales et Politiques—director of the École Normale, Member of the Royal Council for Public Education—and a peer of France. As his pupil and biographer, Jules Simon writes, “He had only to become minister to have exhausted the list of human honours.” He became it in 1840. “It is difficult,” continues the same authority, “to realize at the present day the power and prestige which these dignities conferred under Louis Philippe.” In the parlement he took precedence of a Marshal of France. In the teaching of philosophy, in the whole of France as in the Sorbonne, his power was absolute. Over all other branches and institutions of education it was enormous. He held the

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

careers of all the teachers in France in the hollow of his hand. With one turn of his fingers he could condemn them to eternal poverty and obscurity in the provinces—or raise them to the highest pinnacle in the Sorbonne.

Nor was his personality less awe-inspiring than his position. At his approach learned men of age and standing who had jostled through their undergraduate days with him grew red and silent as schoolboys suddenly surprised by their master, while professors from the country brought their children to look at him from a distance as at royalty. “When he appeared in the great amphitheatre of the Sorbonne,” says Simon, “the crowd which overflowed into the courtyard broke out into wild applause, he stretched out a hand to command silence, and in the midst of these eager youths, of these old men who had returned to the undergraduate benches to hear him, of these savants, of these adversaries, slowly, almost always as if he were still arranging his ideas, in a language virile, picturesque, solemn, he delivered his oracles. The spectacle was profoundly moving. When suddenly he opened up a vast horizon, or when he struck out one of those phrases which engrave themselves for ever in the memory, which stimulate thought and imagination, then enthusiasm reached its height. He was thin—he seemed in pain, his whole frame was

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

shaken by that famous *fièvre metaphysique*, more intense than the fever of the poet, and as fertile in great results. His eyes literally shot flames. He rarely smiled, rarely spoke impetuously, yet one felt that he could shine in any manner whatsoever. This great orator, this great thinker was the enemy of the enemy, that is to say, of the counter-revolution; he had made the ministers of the Restoration tremble; he was the prophet of the liberal party, the master and interpreter of the future. He was literally the idol of the youth of the schools, and, what this youth did not know, he was at the same time the idol of the salons, where he bore his learning softened with a thousand graces."

At about seven o'clock he would turn out the young man he was coaching, the country professor he was cheering up or pitching into, or the colleague with whom he was consulting, and dress to dine in the Faubourg S. Germain, and pass the evening in the brilliant society gathered in the salon of Mme Recamier, Rachel, or Mme Emil de Girardin.

Yet with all his brilliance and social success, Cousin at the age of forty-six had a reputation as spotless as that of the last *jeune fille* just tripping out of her convent. Gossip had long ago recognized that there was nothing to be got out of him. The most accomplished matchmakers had given him up. His gaunt frame, bent with study, burnt by

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

the *fièvre metaphysique*, seemed exempt from the ordinary lusts of the flesh. A curious hardness and self-sufficiency saved him from the higher and more complicated cravings for affection, domesticity, love. In his pupils he inspired every noble emotion, except affection—and except that he gave them every gift which influence and learning could bestow.

Why did this man who had so much to choose from, and who had rejected so much, succumb so quickly, so completely and for sixteen years to the provincial little wife of an underpaid music-teacher ? The answer is not easy. The intrigue was carried on with such caution on both sides that there was little for contemporaries and less for posterity to take hold of. One thing seems clear, however. Mme Colet hit upon a streak in Cousin's nature which no other living woman had touched. For this cold, brilliant surface had one soft spot. Cousin's passion for the women of the seventeenth century—Mme de Longueville especially—was one of the favourite pleasantries of the salons of the 'thirties. Cousin was said to be languishing for the love of a lady who had been in her grave for nearly two centuries. However this may have been, there is no doubt that his passion for the turbulent beauties of the Fronde was of a different order from the *fièvre metaphysique*. It was of course scholarly, as is shown by the nine large volumes

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

which he devoted to them. Michelet complains that the author keeps "breaking into the narrative with a pile of books under his arm," and that even when he wrote of Mme de Longueville, "at the moment when her lovely face begins to materialize before the reader he hears the crash of an infolio which has been dropped." But the zeal of a lover as well as the thoroughness of a scholar drove him to ransack private collections and public archives, picture galleries and country houses, and museums for some detail about the shape of the eye, the texture of the skin of Mme de Longueville or Mme de Rohan. His interest in them was no accidental hobby, but lay deep in the qualities and defects of his own nature. They represented the only type of woman to whose influence he was profoundly susceptible. Theirs was not merely his favourite type of beauty, but the only type which he recognized as such. "Voilà le fond d'une vrai beauté," he exclaims at the end of his description of Mme de Longueville. It was the type full-blooded, fair-fleshed, at once robust and languishing—which was so much admired in the seventeenth century—and is so often reproduced in its portraits as to seem peculiarly characteristic of that period. Cousin's description of Mme de Longueville would apply word for word to almost any of the portraits in Hampton Court. "Elle était assez grande et

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

d'une taille admirable. L'embon-point et ses avantages ne lui manquaient pas. Elle possédait, je ne puis en douter en regardant les portraits authentiques qui sont sous mes yeux, ce genre d'attraits qu'on prisait si fort au 17<sup>e</sup> siècle, et qui, avec de belles mains avaient fait la réputation d'Anne d'Autriche. Ses yeux étaient du bleu le plus tendre. Des cheveux d'un blond cendré de la dernière finesse, descendant en boucles abondantes ornaient l'ovale gracieux de son visage, et inondaient d'admirables épaules, très découvertes, selon la mode du temps.” “Sa beauté,” he adds, quoting this time from Mme de Motteville, “consistait plus dans les couleurs de son visage que dans la perfection de ses traits.” The distinguishing feature of this beauty was its strength, “le fond de la vraie beauté, comme de la vraie vertu, comme du vrai génie, c'est la force.” It was a type which was fast becoming extinct. “Real beauty,” he adds, “is as rare as real genius or real virtue. It is not given to all ages to taste its exquisite verities. Its cult came to France from Florence at the time of the Renaissance and flourished there till the end of the seventeenth century—when for a variety of reasons it declined.”

Certainly the idols of the nineteenth century—porcelain beauties like Mme Recamier, highly strung Romantics like the Princess de Belgiojoso—

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

were as far removed from the full-blooded, dashing ladies of the seventeenth century as were the *jolies femmes* of the eighteenth whom Cousin regarded with such scorn. As he said in the introduction to his history of Mme de Chevreuse, "The hearth at which those fires were kindled is extinct. There will never be another Mme de Chevreuse. The mould is broken for ever."

He wrote this in 1856. But eighteen years earlier, when Mme Colet was first shown into his room in the Sorbonne, he had not been so sure. Louise was not of course *grande dame*. She had no touch of the exquisite breeding or the pride of race which marked Condé's sister or Chateauneuf's mistress. But there is no doubt that physically she was cast in the same mould. The two existing portraits and all contemporary descriptions, besides Louise's own version, make it abundantly clear that her beauty was of the blond, voluptuous seventeenth-century type. "Louise," says de Mirecourt, "a une véritable taille de Venus antique. Son visage est éblouissant de fraîcheur. Autour de son front pur ses cheveux d'un blond cendré forment un large diadème, et son œil d'un bleu profond rayonne d'esprit sous sa vive prunelle." "Elle est assez belle, mais trop massive pour mon goût," says Alphonse Kant. "Massive," "plantureuse," "tapa-gueuse" are words which occur to almost all writers

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

in describing her. But it was her vigour even more than the accidents of colour and contour which gave Mme Colet her resemblance to the ladies of the seventeenth century. Even Barbey d'Aurevilly, her bitterest enemy, says that she had a kind of beauty “qui ne manquait ni l'éclat tapageur ni l'opulence charnue,” and that “elle avait reçu dans l'esprit cet éspecie de coup de tampon que donnent le ciel et la mer du Midi aux imaginations mêmes vulgaires.” Mme Recamier, after their first meeting, said that what pleased her most in Mme Colet was “l'énergie empreinte sur cette visage.”

Whether or not Cousin consciously compared his new visitor to his favourites of the seventeenth century, there can be little doubt that the qualities which attracted him to her were exactly those which had won his heart in them. The posthumous lover of the turbulent beauties of the Fronde was the predestined victim of Mme Colet. Exactly what was the nature of Louise's feeling for Cousin is uncertain. She was amazed, flattered, delighted, swept off her feet by the suddenness and glory of her conquest, but it is doubtful if her heart was really touched. It was left for another and a greater than Cousin to initiate her into the mysteries of passion.

For the moment, however, Cousin seemed to give Louise everything she wanted, affection, admira-

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

tion, the society of a man cultured and influential beyond her wildest dreams. Cousin's conversation was famous in Paris, the city of brilliant talkers. "He was," says Simon, "unrivalled ; happy phrases, new ideas, comparisons, anecdotes crowded upon him, and he wielded them with a freedom of spirit and a mastery which were incomparable. He passed from pleasantry to emotion, and from the greatest things to trivialities with an ease which made everything appear quite simple. . . . It was like magic." . . . So indeed it seemed to Louise after the stale gossip and platitudes of the professors of the Conservatoire. But even the affairs of the Rue de Sèvres began to look up after 1838. Cousin was too polite to offer money and Louise too respectable to take it, but he found many other ways of filling her purse. From the moment of their liaison Louise found no difficulty in getting her poems and articles accepted and handsomely paid. A word from Cousin would secure the publication of almost anything, almost anywhere. The letters collected by Félix Chambon in the *Annales Romantiques* show with how high a hand he pushed her wares. "You might get the enclosed article published in your next issue," he writes to the editor of the *Revue de Deux Mondes*, "I admit it is not perfect, but you can easily make it presentable by revising one or two passages, and parts of it are very good.

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

Besides—the author, Mme Colet, is a friend of mine, and in every way deserving of encouragement.” In the same peremptory tone he wrote to the manager of the Theatre asking that her play, “*La Jeunesse de Goethe*,” might be performed as often as possible. His influence secured its production at the *Comédie Française*, but even he could not ensure its success. In 1840, when Cousin became Minister of Education, one of his first steps was to secure Mme Colet a pension of 1,200 francs a year, exactly on what grounds it would be difficult to say, but pensions were given for curious reasons under Louis Philippe. So the threadbare little flat began to blossom into a quite luxurious cosiness, and Mme Colet no longer wept over her wardrobe when she was asked to an evening party.

And she was very often asked to parties now. There was no eminent man who was not proud to know Cousin, no salon which was not open to receive him. He did not of course introduce Louise everywhere, but he gave her that foothold without which the most determined climber is powerless. Louise was not generally received by the ladies of the Faubourg S. Germain, but her acquaintance among artists and men of letters soon became enormous. She grew to be a familiar figure at the gatherings of the intelligentsia. Maxime du Camp describes her one evening “sortant le plus qu’elle pouvait

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

d'une robe en gaze bleu, plantureuse, gesticulant, parlant haut, essayant d'attirer les regards et se promenant de salon au salon au bras de Babinet." Within a year she had begun to achieve a salon, not of course one of the great nineteenth-century salons. Louise was handicapped in too many ways for that, but still a very creditable and interesting one. Its weakest point was the women, who were very few and those mostly actresses. But many of the men were of the highest eminence, Alfred de Vigny, Gautier, occasionally Baudelaire and others of their circle, Babinet, the editor of the journal des Debats, Prèault, Pradier, Beranger, de Musset and many others. A certain number, of course, must be set down to the account of Cousin. There was no young man with his way to make in art, science or letters to whom the favour of a member of so many academies, the disposer of so much patronage would not have been an advantage. A prospective vacancy in the Académie Française was well known to lead to an influx of visitors in the Rue de Sèvres. But there was a large nucleus which came for Louise herself. Her florid beauty, her reputation as a poetess, her cordial, almost gushing, manners, the trouble which she would take to make or cultivate a new acquaintance, her high spirits, all contributed to her success. Pontmartin describes Babinet as frequenting her "À cause de son talent dont il était conisseur, à

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

cause de sa beauté plantureuse dont il était gourmet, à cause de ses emportements favouches de louve romaine dont il était gourmant." Many others must have been drawn to her by just these charms.

For Louise soon ceased to be on her best behaviour in Paris and began to indulge in those scenes which had been the terror of her parents and later of her husband. The society in which Victor Cousin moved was so unaccustomed to displays of primitive and uncontrolled emotion as to find them immensely diverting. Louise herself realized this, and classes her "hot southern temperament" and her "importemments de sauvage" among her charms, along with her blue eyes and plump white neck. The most famous of her scenes was provoked by Alphonse Karr in 1840.

Till this date Louise's connexion with Cousin had been carried on with singular discretion. It was well known, of course, that Cousin had "discovered her," had introduced her to people who might be useful, and was constantly to be found at her flat. Such was Cousin's reputation, however, that it was not generally considered that she was more than a protégée. "There were no women in his life," writes Jules Simon, "at least, no living women. There remains this great gap in his heart and in his talent." In the chapter headed "Les Amours" this misguided professor deals exclusively with

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

Cousin's seventeenth-century biographies. Barthélemy S.-Hilaire, in his three-volume *Life and Letters of Victor Cousin*, makes no mention of Mme Colet. Their relations were put beyond all doubt, however, by Felix Chambon in "Deux Amours d'un Philosophe," an article in the *Annales Romantiques* of 1904, containing a small but quite convincing collection of letters dealing with this episode. To the more intimate friends of Cousin, not in the university but in the world, there can never have been any doubt on the subject. Sainte Beuve who was constantly receiving commands to publish verses admittedly mediocre and ungrammatical, Beranger who often acted as witness and mediator in stormy scenes, cannot have had any illusion as to the platonic character of the philosopher's friendship. But such was the majesty of Cousin's character and the purity of his reputation that the usual judgment of society was reversed, and it was said that the lady was compromising the gentleman.

All might have passed without a public scandal, however, if Louise in 1840 had not rather inopportunedly become pregnant. It did not occur to her to modify her way of life—and still dressed in light blue, she continued to frequent evening parties without her husband ,in company with Cousin, Babinet, or some other admirer. In July, 1840, appeared a scurrilous little paragraph in Alphonse

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

Karr's weekly, *Guêpes*, in which the Minister of Education, Mme Colet, and the foundling hospital were put in an insulting juxtaposition. Louise, scarlet with passion, showed the notice to Victor Cousin, who smiled with Olympian dignity and patted her on the head. She showed it to her husband—the tired music-teacher sat down with a sigh and wrote a long letter to the paper—which Louise took up and stamped upon. “It was not for me,” she said afterwards, “to ask him to fight a duel.” She alone treated the matter with due seriousness. In 1869, when people had long ago ceased to couple her name with anybody, or indeed to mention it at all, Mme Colet published a full account of the affair—her “*Reponse aux Guêpes de M. Alphonse Karr.*”

The trouble had begun at an evening party in July, 1840. There Louise had seen Karr in company with “a woman so hideous and vicious that one wonders that decent people invited her to their houses, still more that a decent man should take her as his mistress. Still such was the case, more—the horror was received at court.” Louise saw the couple approach their hostess, and look in her direction—evidently asking for an introduction with a view to obtaining some favour from Cousin. The proud fastidious soul of Mme Colet shrunk from contact with such depravity, and she refused her

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

hostess's suggested introduction with a shudder. The couple did their best to bluff it out. "I saw M. Karr sneer and the female monster at his side fix me with her glaucous eyes. They left the party together and went straight to the monster's house where together they composed the infamous article which appeared in the next number of the *Guêpes*." The episode ends in Mme Colet's finest flamboyant style. It was written "chez cette femme . . . qui devrait être à Saint Lazare et qui se glisse à la cour."

Meanwhile the young wife went home all innocent and unsuspecting. One morning as she was sewing a little white garment for the unborn child a newspaper addressed to her in Karr's handwriting was brought in. She opened it cheerfully, but after reading a few words she sank fainting to the ground. As she regained consciousness she gave vent to "un cri terrible, appel au secours d'autrui, et à défaut—appel à moi." There was none to hear her cry. When her husband returned from his music lesson he refused to take the only course which would have satisfied his wife. So Louise bottled up her emotions and retired to bed. But she did not sleep. All night long the blood boiled in her veins, the blood of her grandfather the conventional, the blood of her grandmother the severe and chaste matron who had saved bishops in the Revolution. The very

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

child within her “frémissait et criat, ‘Il faut que cet homme meure.’”

With the first streak of light Louise rose, put on a wrap and descended to the kitchen. Here she took a simple table knife, “me procurer une arme élégante m’aura paru théâtral,” she explains. She might have seen that it was sharp, however, which precaution she seems to have omitted. “Je ne songeai qu’a agir avec simplicité comme il convient dans une grande douleur.” Thus in her morning wrap with the knife in her hand she went round to the house of Alphonse Karr. He opened the door himself in his shirt sleeves. Still acting with the simplicity and dignity characteristic of “une grande douleur,” Louise said quietly, “J’ai à vous parler.” Surprised at this very early call but placid and polite, Karr turned to lead the way upstairs. As he did so Louise brought out her knife and struck at his ribs. One solitary speck of blood appeared through his shirt. Still with the same simplicity and dignity Louise recognized that she had failed. Without a word she turned and left the house, escorted to the door by Karr. She staggered home grasping at the railings for support. In the agony of the long illness which followed, her friends kept all news of the adventure from her. When she recovered the affair had blown over, and anyhow her thoughts were now all centred on the

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

new-born infant. She had no ears for vulgar gossip.

It does not seem as if her friends can have had much difficulty in keeping news of the affair from her. It would be difficult to believe in the story at all were it not that its main facts were substantiated by Karr himself. In his version, however, he called a cab and handed his would-be murderess into it. After her departure he picked up the knife which she had dropped on the stairs and hung it in the hall above the inscription, "Presented by Mme Colet, 1840—in the back." "Elle est assez belle," he remarks, "mais trop massive pour mon goût." "Massive," comments Louise, "J'étais massive comme une femme qui va mettre son enfant au monde."

Now that the child was safely born Louise swept onwards to greater triumphs, fresh adventures, new scenes. In 1842, Cousin with some trepidation had secured his mistress an introduction to Mme Recamier. The famous Juliette was now sixty-five, but time seemed as powerless against her girlish beauty as adversity was against her salon. Childless, infirm and nearly blind, living on a microscopic income in a remote suburb, Mme Recamier still drew the choicest company in Paris night after night to her fireside. She still charmed them with the pretty blush, the downcast eyes, the engaging shyness which had won all hearts when she had been

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

twenty-four and her husband a millionaire. After forty-five years of continuous flirtation her reputation was still spotless as her famous white dresses.

It would probably never have occurred to Cousin to introduce Louise to this vestal bower had it not been for the accident that it happened to be so near Louise's own. Since her husband's ruin, Mme Recamier had lived in a suite of rooms set apart for her in the Abbaye aux Bois, Rue de Sèvres. As Cousin was constantly passing from one salon to the other it was natural that he should talk of one lady and the other, rousing their mutual curiosity. At last, through the kind offices of Mme Dupin, he got permission to bring them together. Mme Dupin writes Cousin an account of the meeting—evidently with the object of giving pleasure. "On Wednesday I spent the evening with Mme Recamier. She had no voice at first, but when she recovered it a little she talked with Mme Colet. . . . Do you know what struck Mme Recamier at the first sight of Mme Colet? It was her extraordinary vitality" (*l'énergie empreinte sur cette figure*). The meeting was a great success—Mme Recamier told Mme Dupin that she had quite fallen in love with Mme Colet, and begged her to repeat her visits. Juliette, like Louise, came from Lyons, and though they had moved in very different circles they could at least talk over the scenes of their girlhood, and Mme

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

Recamier was reaching the age when her mind moved instinctively backwards. Louise was a very good listener when she chose, and Mme Recamier loved to tell stories about her old friends Mme de Stael, Balzac, Queen Caroline of Naples, and her admirers Prince Augustus of Russia, Chateaubriand, the two de Montmorencys. So evening after evening Louise sat in the dainty little room in the Abbaye aux Bois listening to Mme Recamier's tender reminiscences, helping her to sort her endless packets of old letters.

Meanwhile her relations with Mme Dupin had received a check. They had begun warmly. "Mme Colet made herself so charming," writes Mme Dupin to Cousin, "and so spoilt me by her sweet ways and her pretty speeches, and was so engaging that I promised to dine with her, on condition that I might rush off at 7.30, which I did." A few weeks later Mme Dupin wrote, "Let us love her generously, she needs it. Her heart is full of fine and sweet feelings. I am sorry for her." But Louise could never keep up her good behaviour for long, and her pretty ways and speeches were soon forgotten in a devastating scene in which she accused Mme Dupin of trying to supplant her with Cousin. As soon as it was over of course she realized her folly in offending so promising an acquaintance, and went round to Cousin in floods of tears to beg

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

him to make the peace between them. Cousin sent a charming little letter of apology from Louise enclosed in a letter of his own. Mme Dupin answered the latter only. "On my return," she writes, "I found the noble lines which you were good enough to write to me and the letter which those lines enclosed. She expresses regret for having wounded me, begs my pardon and is coming to see me. Oh, if this letter had only been true. . . . I would have forbidden her to make any apologies. But she can't possibly mean what she says. And then that housemaid-like scene (*cette scène de domestique*). If I live a thousand years I shall still hear that voice. Nothing will give you any idea of what it was like." Poor Cousin, who had been through several such scenes himself, had a very good idea of what it was like—and he was more careful in future of introducing Mme Colet to the ladies of his acquaintance.

Meanwhile in 1849 Mme Recamier died, a victim to that cholera she had so long dreaded. Mme Colet's circle condoled with her on the loss of her illustrious friend. They would have done so still more had they realized the use that she would make of it. Within a few weeks of Mme Recamier's death there appeared a little volume of love-letters written by Benjamin Constant to Mme Recamier, edited by Mme Louise Colet. It fell like a bomb-

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

shell into the two respectable families of Constant and Recamier. This passion of Benjamin Constant's—disastrous like his other passions—had been unlike them unreturned and entirely secret. His attitude towards his spotless idol had been that of de Musset's Fortunio.

Je fais ce que sa fantasie  
Veut m'ordonner,  
Et je puis, s'il lui faut ma vie  
La lui donner.

Du mal qu'une amour ignorée  
Nous fait souffrir  
J'en porte l'âme déchirée  
Jusqu'à mourir.

Mais j'aime trop pour que je dis  
Qui j'ose aimer,  
Et je veux mourir pour ma mie  
Sans la nommer.

No one had known. His fatal change of front during the one hundred days which had been a forlorn attempt to gain her favour had been generally attributed to misplaced ambition. His subsequent cynicism, bitterness and depression had been attributed to his wrecked career and his former unhappy

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

love affairs. It is clear from these letters that these troubles were as nothing beside the indifference of Juliette Recamier. They show in every line the hand of the author of Adolphe, his sensitiveness, his pride, his sincerity, his perfect taste, his ineffectiveness, his ineradicable weakness.

"I can do nothing without you," he writes, "your affection is necessary to my reason as to my life, and to counsel me to work while you drive me away is to expect a man who is being killed to walk and be active. You must have seen this when you were unkind to me these last days. I couldn't look at anyone, speak to anyone. I was completely exhausted, almost mad. At the first sign of indifference from you all that will come back again. This is not a means which I am using to soften you, but a fact which I am stating, and which lies at the root of everything because it cannot change.

If, then, you will not believe what is evident, that all my powers, and consequently all my career, depend on your affection, it is useless to make me attempt anything. After having obtained from others promises, interest, service, at the first cold glance from you I should throw everything away. I should not be able to do otherwise, you must start from there. Your affection since the day before yesterday has once more made it possible for me to live. If you leave me that, if I can see you alone,

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

if I can ease my soul by talking to you, I shall achieve something. But if " . . .

His secret had been kept for nearly half a century — now it was published to the world when both parties were dead and unable to give or withhold their consent, published without consultation with either of the families concerned, by a complete stranger, a woman of doubtful reputation.

How had Mme Colet got possession of the letters? Her own explanation was that they were given her by Mme Recamier with instructions to publish them after her death. Mme Lenormand, Mme Recamier's niece and literary executrix, claimed that Louise had borrowed the letters during her aunt's lifetime, copied them and returned the originals which were still in Mme Lenormand's possession. The matter was taken to law and the judges, who presumably had the evidence before them, decided against Mme Colet. Her book was recalled, she was ordered to restore her documents to Mme Lenormand and to pay damages.

Whatever may have been the fact about Louise's ownership of the letters, there can be no doubt as to her impropriety in publishing them. No legal title could have justified her revealing the secrets of people recently deceased without consulting with either of their families. The fact that Louise, habitually so communicative about her doings, acted

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

in this case without consulting Cousin, Beranger or any other of the literary men whom she saw constantly, seems to show that her conscience was not clear, or anyhow that she foresaw that they would disapprove. This did not of course prevent Louise from imploring Cousin's help when it was too late. He and Beranger exchanged anxious letters on the subject. "For my part," writes the latter, "I shall always be ready to swear to the innocence of the defendant, and the perfect good faith of our friend. To tell you the truth, however, I should be very glad to be let off the task. All this noise," he adds, "she seems to mistake for glory. I hope she may get it in the end to compensate for all the trouble the beginning of this affair has cost her. May God keep her from similar adventures in the future."

His prayer was not granted. Louise's later years were full of them. Even as Beranger wrote he did not know the latest adventure on which she had embarked—a passionate love affair with Gustave Flaubert.

## 2 : FLAUBERT'S MISTRESS

IT is as the mistress of Flaubert that Mme Colet is known to posterity. In 1846, however, Flaubert was known to Paris—in so far as he was known at all—as the lover of Mme Colet. In 1846 Louise was at the height of such glory as she was to attain. And indeed seen from the living-room of the drawing-master of Lyons this was no mean height. She was one of the most familiar figures at literary parties in Paris. Pradier christened her Sapho—Cousin haunted her flat. She had been clasped to the breast of Mme Recamier, and snubbed by George Sand—Alphonse Karr devoted one of his *Guêpes* to her. Though Sainte-Beuve refused to sacrifice one of his “Lundis” he was not above writing “Chere poète—laissez moi vous appeler tout simplement.” De Musset had called. Four times her poems had been crowned by the Academy. Her play had been acted at the Comédie Française.

Physically too she was at her prime. The rose was full blown—but had not yet begun to fall. She had a boundless energy and vitality more valuable to the hunter of men than actual beauty. But at this period even her bitterest enemies did not deny

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

Mme Colet a certain kind of beauty. Her long fair hair hung in heavy ringlets of the time over plump shoulders. Below breast and hips swelled in voluptuous curves. The brilliant red and white of her cheeks had not yet begun to fade into purple and brown. Her eyes still matched the sky of the Midi and were managed with the address for which its ladies are famous.

Indeed, all Mme Colet's charms were carefully "managed." Her whole person presented an elaborate colour scheme destined to show off to the best advantage her hair and eyes. "Presque toujours," says the admiring de Mirecourt, "elle est habillée de bleu—couleur favourite de blondes." "On eut dit," snarls Barbey d'Aurevilly, "qu'il n'y avait qu'une seule place qui ne fut de cet bleu ridicule et hideux—et c'était la place de son cœur." "J'ai toujours adoré le bleu," simpers Louise herself. If anything Mme Colet paid too much attention to her charms. The room in which she wrote, and received her visitors, was like the apartment of an untidy beauty specialist. Scent bottles, powder-puffs and curling tongs littered the desk and the mantelpiece. The caller who forgot to clear his seat was likely to find himself sitting on the hand-mirror or the hair-wash. Mme Colet generally received her guests in her dressing-gown. Her hair was of course loose—and she played with it incessantly.

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

Her admirers could then see at a glance how long and silky her curls were—how well she manicured her hands—and the elegant shape of her arms. Mme Colet was especially proud of her arms. “Do you know where they found the arm of the Venus of Milo ?” she used to ask her gentlemen friends, “in the sleeves of my dress.” Some indeed thought Louise’s opinion of her own charms too high—and her anxiety to display them excessive. “By dint of thinking herself beautiful,” sneered Du Camp, “she made herself positively ugly.”

But he did not write this till 1870. Thirty years earlier he had been ready enough to admire the charms so generously displayed. Indeed though Mme Colet’s net was crude and simple enough it cannot be denied that on the whole it “caught the fish.” Her articles were published, her poems were crowned. Men whose names were known in every capital in Europe jostled up her little staircase and sat about on her discarded petticoats. They gathered round her at evening parties and crossed the boulevards to speak to her. And what else did she live for ? To achieve exactly this position and to maintain it was the whole aim of Mme Colet’s existence.

One evening in the autumn of 1846 at a party in Pradier’s studio her “cher Phidias” pointed out to Louise a tall, good-looking though rather shy and heavy young man. “Vous voyez bien,” he said,

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

“Ce gros garçon là. Il veut faire de la littérature. Vous devriez lui donner les conseils.” Louise, a radiant vision in blue, bore down upon her new pupil. It was Gustave Flaubert.

The lessons were begun at once and progressed rapidly. Within a week she was his mistress. What is more remarkable she remained his mistress for eight years. For the first and probably the only time in her life Louise was in love. She thrilled in the embrace of a man strong, good-looking, in his first youth. She adored an intellectual power and distinction which her peculiar flair of talent and her eight years' intercourse with eminent men taught her was rare in the highest degree. She gave herself mind and body, temperament and intellect. She embraced, worshipped, enveloped and succumbed to him.

And Flaubert? All that was known of Flaubert at that time was that he was the son of a country doctor, that he had independent means and lived in the country—three miles from Rouen—and that he was writing a book. No one knew exactly what kind of a book it was. Flaubert's name at this time had never appeared in print—not so much as at the foot of a magazine article. He never read his works aloud, or passed them round in manuscript. When de Musset remarked that when this great work did come out it would probably be a tenth-rate

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

imitation of Balzac no one in all France was in a position to contradict him—except Bouilhet. But in 1846 no one had heard of Bouilhet.

His mother and Bouilhet, Flaubert loved in his own way. For the rest he lived at this time as he says “like a bear in a cave.” He had as he says himself, “au fond de l’âme le brouillard du nord.” He cultivated neither men nor women. The greatest events of his life had been “quelques pensées, des lectures, certains couchers de soleil à Trouville au bord de la mer, et des causeries de cinq ou six heures consécutives avec un ami qui est maintenant marié et perdu pour moi.” There was nothing for him in the world except “Les beaux vers, les phrases bien tournées, harmonieuses, eschantantes, les beaux couchers de soleil, les clairs de lune, les tables colorés, les marbres antiques et les têtes accentuées.” Nothing but “le beau” and “l’art.”

But “l’art” was a hard master to Flaubert. It was not as with Mme Colet a pretty plaything, a way of earning money and obtaining introductions. Literature had for him no connexion with money or fame. “Like the god of the Jews it demands its holocausts,” he says. And year after year its stern and single-minded votary waited at the altar pouring out youth, health, money, friends, life itself. Moreover, since the age of twenty-four, in spite of his splendid physique, Flaubert had been a nervous invalid. He was

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

subject to fits of profound depression, and to sudden obscure nervous attacks. A visit paid by relations for the week-end made him ill. If he rang his bell for more coal his mother came in to see if he felt faint. All the quiet gentle life of the widow's house at Croisset centred round Flaubert. And Flaubert's life centred round the phrases which he coined with such agony.

What could this man have in common with Mme Colet ? It seems a curious freak of providence to introduce such a couple to each other—that they should be lovers for eight years seems to presuppose continual miraculous intervention. Du Camp's explanation of the affair is simple : “*Elle le persecuta.*” This may be true of the end of the affair—but it is not true of the whole of it. An eight years' liaison with a man like Flaubert is not based on mere persecution. But it is easy for us to be wiser than Du Camp. He had not that compelling evidence which lies before us—Flaubert's letters.

The greater part of this strange love affair was carried on by post. Every two months the lovers met—sometimes in Paris, at Louise's flat after her husband's death in 1851 ; before, in some shady hotel. But more often they met at some wayside station between Paris and Rouen and spent the day or the week-end together. Louise was never allowed to set foot in Croisset. The meetings were neither so

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

long nor so frequent as one of the parties could have wished—but on the whole they were very regular. Between their meetings the lovers used to write. Flaubert wrote nearly every evening. Probably Mme Colet did the same, but Flaubert did not keep her letters. She kept all his, however—and they form two volumes, each the size of *Mme Bovary*. Flaubert always wrote late, often in the small hours of the morning. The home was very still. Long ago the lights had gone out under his mother's bedroom door and the servants' quarters were silent. One by one the lights which blinked in the big house at the other end of the garden had given way to the darkness. Only the light still streamed out from Flaubert's own lamp, and lay in pale broken strips across the black branches of the trees. The pages of manuscript over which Flaubert had agonized during the day still lay on his desk. They were black with erasures. Every sentence had been written three or four times over. Words were written above the lines and below, every page “sentant la suer” as their author said they should. But now he took a clean sheet and wrote fast and fluently. The French was clear and perfect as that over which he had been groaning, perspiring, positively crying in the morning. But now he wrote without erasure and almost without pause.

But why to Mme Colet? What could he have got

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

out of it? In the first place, he got what he needed very badly—a woman. Flaubert's sexual history was curious—especially for a Frenchman. From his sixteenth to his nineteenth year he had had a wild adolescent passion for a young married woman. He had hardly understood the nature of his feelings himself, however, and had no opportunity, and indeed no notion of satisfying them. As a law student he had indulged in an occasional intrigue—cheap and squalid enough. But in his twenty-fourth year he had given up the law and retired to Croisset for good. Here he had lived entirely cut off from all female society except that of his devoted querulous mother. Now Flaubert, though neurotic, was a strong, powerfully built man. Such abstinence was not natural. It did not suit him. Mme Colet was a godsend to a man in this position. She was voluptuous, handsome, experienced. She could teach a shy and clumsy young man a great deal. Flaubert was grateful though frank. "When I examine myself," he writes, "this is what I feel for you—In the first place a great physical attraction. Next a settled affection, etc." Or again, "I should have liked to come and say good-bye—the flesh called me, but my nerves held me back."

But there was more than this in Flaubert's feelings for Mme Colet. His letters were written to a woman who was more to the writer than a mere

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

prostitute. She had caught his imagination. His thoughts and feelings had crystallized round her. In a word, he was in love. She came into his mind unbidden and dominated his thoughts against his will. “I am always thinking of you. I am always dreaming of your face, of your shoulders, of your white neck, of your voice—passionate, violent and sweet at the same time ‘comme un cri d’amour.’” Or again, “It is now 100 o’clock. I have just received your letter and sent off mine. I have hardly got up, and here I am writing to you again without knowing what I am going to say. You see whether or not I think of you. Often I seem to hear behind me the rustling of your skirt on the carpet. I start and turn round as the wind blows the portière just as if you were coming in. I see your beautiful white forehead. Do you know you have a wonderful forehead? Too beautiful even to be kissed, a forehead pure and lofty, ‘tout brillant de ce qu’il renferme.’” Her portrait was propped up in the corner of the sofa opposite his writing-table. He was pleased and excited as a boy when his mother admired it. He counted the days till he would see her, anticipating the details. “I shall arrive in Paris at four o’clock or a quarter past. I see myself going up your staircase. I can almost hear the sound of your bell. Is Madame at home—Come in—Ah je les savoure d’avance ces vingt quatre heures là.” He turned

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

them over afterwards, sucking the rind when he had eaten the fruit. "Do you remember the other evening when we were driving together just at the beginning of the Champ Elysées how we sat for a long time without speaking? You looked at me at once so sad and tender. I could see your eyes shining in the dark under your hat. I am always turning back to that memory, back towards you. I can say like Calydas: 'Mon cœur va en arrière comme la flamme de l'étendart que l'on porte contre le vent.' "

But neither physical enjoyment nor tender emotions were enough for Flaubert. He could conceive of no intimate relationship which was not largely intellectual. He did not want a wife. He could not be content with a mere mistress. He had dreamed of an ideal relationship between himself and Louise. She was to be to him something between a mistress and a friend. With her he was to be "not so silly as one is with our mistress, and more affectionate than one is with our friends." Unfortunately Louise could not rise to this height. It was easy enough for Flaubert to be more affectionate with her than he was with his friends. It was on the other side of the relationship that her weakness lay. For a long time Flaubert did not notice it. Perhaps he was so dazzled by her hair and her shoulders and the play of her blue eyes

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

that he did not pay attention to what she was saying. Louise probably did not mind. As Hardy says, a woman can generally forgive a man for paying more attention to herself than to what she is saying. Besides, Mme Colet was not deficient in that peculiarly feminine form of conversation which consists in retailing a man's own ideas as her own, and thus giving them just a touch of that novelty which they were beginning to lose.

But Mme Colet could not keep up the pretty delusion indefinitely. After a time in spite of her constant references to "art for art's sake," and the supreme importance of keeping oneself out of one's writing, Flaubert could not fail to see that he had not here a really kindred spirit.

Mme Colet prided herself on her sensibility. The least æsthetic emotion was apt to bring on what she describes as "*un saisissement d'artiste*" when verse rose rapidly, "*de mon cœur à mon cerveau*" and descended thence to her lips. She remarks, "*comme toujours lorsqu'un émotion forte et decisive me saisit un chant me monte au levres.*" It was but natural that the man who thought nothing of devoting a morning to the turning of one phrase, who was happy if he could find the exact word which he wanted in an hour, should shrink from these indiscriminate outpourings. On many an expedition he was reduced to a gloomy silence,

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

and finally to shuddering irritation, by the lyrical outbursts of his mistress when confronted with "le beau."

All this he told her and more. Indeed Shakespeare was not more frank to his dark lady than Flaubert to his blonde. "If you only knew," he writes, "how often I have suffered from this in you, how often I have been irritated by your habit of 'poetizing' things which I should have liked better left as they are [*'a leur état simple'*]. Why use the everlasting insipid figures of speech of the poet which the nearer they are to an abstraction the more they resemble a type—that is to something anti-artistic, anti-plastic, anti-human and consequently anti-poetical, in spite of any verbal talent which one may put into it."

It was almost worse when Mme Colet talked about literature than about nature. Flaubert was at this time a very hard, not to say bitter and narrow-minded, critic. With increasing age and a wider circle of literary friends he became more tolerant. But till the age of thirty the only writers he could read with pleasure were the old masters, Homer, Rabelais, Rousard, Shakespeare and among moderns Bouilhet and himself. Almost all other contemporaries—de Musset, Beranger, Sainte-Beuve—were anathema. With Mme Colet it was enough to meet a writer at an evening party to make him a

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

genius of the highest order. She had only to hear a man well spoken of by others to burst into pæans of praise on her own account. Nothing irritated Flaubert more than these indiscriminate gushings over authors whom he considered second rate. "Si le discours de Musset qui m'horripile t'a paru charmant et que tu trouves également charmant ce que j'ai pu faire ou ferai, qu'en conclure ?"

What indeed ? At last Flaubert was driven to the conclusion at which the rest of Mme Colet's acquaintance had arrived long ago, that she did not really care for literature in itself. At first he scolds her gently, almost amorously. "I must scold you about something which shocks and scandalizes me—and that is how little you care for art now. For glory, yes I grant you : but art, the sole true and good thing in life, how can you compare that to an earthly love, how can you prefer the worship of a relative beauty to the worship of the true ? Well, I don't mind telling you there is only one good thing in me, there is only this one thing in myself that I respect, I can *admire*. As for you, you mix up with beauty a heap of irrelevant things, usefulness, convenience, goodness knows what." Or again, "You are sadly lacking in religion in its fullest sense. I mean, it seems to me that you do not really adore Genius, que tu ne tressaille pas jusque dans tes entrailles à la contemplation du Beau."

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

On a closer acquaintance Flaubert expressed his grievance still more plainly. Louise is in fact essentially worldly. " You are," he writes, " a pagan and a Southerner, you respect the passions and hope for happiness. . . . As for me, I loathe the world. I am a Catholic and have at heart something of the green mildew of Norman Cathedrals. I had hoped that you would keep my soul company, and that there would be around us a vast circle which would separate us from others ; but no, il te faut a toi les choses normales et voulues : I am not what a lover should be. As a matter of fact few people would consider me what a young man should be. You want proofs, facts. You love me enormously, much more than anyone has ever loved me, or will ever love me. But you love me as any other woman would love me, with the same pre-occupation with secondary plans, and the same incessant little miseries. You are worried about a flat, a journey, a new acquaintance. If you think that it makes me angry, no, no, but it distresses me and makes me wretched for your sake."

Flaubert was right. Louise was really far more to be pitied than he was himself—her side of the connexion was far less satisfactory than his. After all he set the pace, and one which was not at all to her liking. She was one of those women who cry easily, but there is no doubt that the tears which she shed

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

over him were very many and very bitter. She made the fatal mistake, however, of shedding them in her lover's presence, of blotting her letters with them—of crying and complaining in season and out. She wanted no ideal relationship, that of a sublime hermaphrodite, half mistress, half friend, all art, truth and beauty, lived in a magic circle of ideas cut off from the rest of commonplace humanity. She had not noticed the “green mildew of Gothic Cathedrals” in Flaubert’s soul, and could not see “le brouillard du nord” which enveloped him. He appeared to her as a broad-shouldered, handsome young man and she wanted him for her lover, whole-hearted and unreserved. Her letters were full of plans and proposals destined to bring this about. He was to come to Paris more often, every fortnight instead of every two months. He was to take a flat in Paris where they could meet more comfortably. He was to leave Croisset and his mother, and live in Paris. All these plans were received by Flaubert like a child’s requests for the moon or a revolver—sometimes kindly, sometimes irritably. But always they were put aside.

Mme Colet could not understand it. Her side of the story is told in her own novel *Lui*. The Marquise Stéphanie de Rostand (herself) is talking to a young genius who describes how delightful it is to give one’s days to art and one’s evenings to love.

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

"Ah," thinks Stéphanie bitterly, "Pourquoi Léonce [Flaubert] n'a t'il pas ces idées là ? "

Why not ? Louise must have some explanation. Since Flaubert could not or would not give a satisfactory reason why he would not spend the whole of his life with her she was forced to find one for herself. She hit on the kindest solution for her vanity—a rival. She began to torture her lover and herself with a series of absurd suspicions and jealousies. She was jealous of his writing, of his mother, of Bouilhet. She then departed entirely from the realities of fact and plunged into a series of her own fictions. Flaubert had commented on the good looks of Pradier's model. Louise at once began to build a lurid romance on the unlucky remark. The girl was his mistress, had been for years. He came to Paris and visited her in secret without going near Mme Colet. This edifice having been gently demolished she began to build another. Flaubert once asked her to post a letter to a married woman, an old family friend with whom he had been in love as a schoolboy. So this was it. Now she understood. A woman old enough to be his mother—who considered herself virtuous, etc., etc. Again Flaubert patiently explained, and again Mme Colet's suspicions wavered and fastened on another object, this time on an arm-chair. "Is it possible," writes her lover, "that you reproach

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

me even for the innocent affection which I feel for an arm-chair. If I were to mention my boots to you, I think you would be jealous of them. Come, come, I love you very much all the same."

But it was a strain. The strain became greater after 1851, when Mme Colet's husband died. The obvious thing now seemed to her that she and Flaubert should marry. Flaubert had no ties except his mother, neither had she except her little girl. A man must need a wife—a woman certainly needs a husband. Flaubert had a comfortable house and income. Louise had an inconvenient flat and a very small income, moreover, and chiefly, she adored him. Look at it how you please it seemed the merest common sense that they should marry. Louise began to take Flaubert into her confidence about her money affairs. He was not interested and could not understand a hint for a loan. She began to say what a pity it was that he had no children, and to ask if he did not long for them. Flaubert did not. The world was a disagreeable place, so why bring fresh people into it. He was a disagreeable man—his children would probably be even more disagreeable. Louise was seized at this time with an almost uncontrollable desire to meet Flaubert's mother. She evidently, though on what grounds it is difficult to imagine, hoped to find an ally in the old lady.

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

Flaubert met her reiterated appeals with that naïve denseness which is so powerful a form of masculine cunning. Well, if she so much desired it he would try to arrange a meeting, not this month, perhaps next. He had his doubts about it. He did not imagine that they would really get on very well together. But since Louise had set her heart on it, of course, no, he had not said these holidays, perhaps in the winter. But he could not for the life of him imagine why she was so anxious about it. Whether a meeting was ever actually brought about is not clear from the letters. But if it was it availed nothing. Flaubert would not marry.

It was on this rock that they finally split. Mme Colet was as determined to marry Flaubert as he was determined not to marry her. Her shrieks grew louder, her tears flowed faster. Every letter was damp with them, every interview a scene. Flaubert's resistance stiffened. At first he had merely remained passive in her embrace, he then tried to untwist her arms from his neck, and at last he slapped her face and ran away.

In a way it was hard on Flaubert to be goaded to this ungentlemanly behaviour. He had never deceived her. Never promised marriage, no hinted at it—not even at a permanent relationship, “mais t'ai-je jamais menti ?” he asks with injured innocence, “où sont les serments que j'ai violées et les

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

phrases que j'ai dit que je ne redise point." In the second letter which he ever wrote to her, within a month of their first meeting, he said, " Since we have confessed that we loved each other, you ask why do I refuse to add 'for always.' Why? It is because I can face the future." He was constantly holding the future before her. " We love each other now—we shall love each other still more perhaps, but who knows? A time will come when we shall hardly remember each other's faces. Have you ever heard an old man tell the story of his youth?" or again, " Come, I shall love you for a long time before I get tired of you." Or perhaps most cruelly frank, " Truly, if I saw you every day perhaps I should love you less. But no—it is for a long time yet. You live in the back parlour of my heart and only come out on Sundays." Samuel Butler says of his own affair, " If ever a man gave a woman his answer clearly and at the very beginning I gave mine to Miss Savage." Flaubert might have said the same; it did not make his answer any the sweeter however.

Anyhow, Mme Colet made Flaubert state his answer much more clearly than Butler's poor little lady. She insisted on having it in so many words, and of course she got it. " And when am I going to be married?" he writes, " Never I hope. I look upon a man who hasn't five thousand a year and who

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

marries as a wretch, a rascal who ought to be beaten." This was the last letter which he ever wrote to her. And when he came to Paris in future he used to drive through her part of the town with the blinds down.

It is not a pleasant story—neither creditable nor satisfactory to either party. There is no doubt that in this affair Flaubert shows himself as selfish, cold-hearted, stingy, as Louise was exacting, sensual, tactless, unreasonable and grossly indecent. But she got out of it the one serious love affair of her life, and she was a woman made for love affairs. Flaubert got out of it the material for *Mme Bovary*.

He does not appear to have recognised this himself and would probably not have admitted it. He was constantly complaining that one of the great difficulties of the subject was its remoteness from his own experience. One of his strongest principles, one which he was particularly fond of impressing upon Louise, was that art should never be a mere reproduction of one's own experience—and that the less there was of the personal element in one's work the better. Yet it is no mere accident that *Mme Bovary* was begun during the liaison with Louise, and published at the end of it—not that those years during which Flaubert was occupied with *Mme Bovary* were those during which he was occupied with Mme Colet. Not, of course, that Mme

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

Bovary is a portrait of Mme Colet, still less that the book relates Flaubert's own love story. But that story is the raw material out of which the novel was fashioned with such consummate skill. Mme Colet was the woman on whom Flaubert's eye fell when he raised them from the canvas of *Mme Bovary*.

After all an adulteress was the only woman whom Flaubert ever held in his arms. Adultery the only form of passion which he knew at first hand. And what is *Mme Bovary* if not a study of adultery? With Louise as with Emma, its cause lies in the character of a woman half-educated, imaginative, sensual and unstable, yoked to a man physically and mentally her inferior. With Mme Colet as with Mme Bovary the course of adultery is passionate, uneasy and finally dreary. Like Mme Colet, Mme Bovary cannot keep her lovers, but tires them by the passion and completeness of her surrender, by the exigencies of her undisciplined temperament. She tires them and is herself tired, "finding in adultery all the platitudes of marriage."

Yet there is a great difference between the two women. For the making of his heroine Flaubert seems to have taken only all the essential features of the character of his mistress. He left out all those accidents which raised her from that bourgeois provincial society to which she really belonged. He stripped her of all those qualities of blue-stocking,

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

lion hunter, climber, which went to make Mme Colet in the eyes of Paris. He described only the woman simple, sensuous, passionate, whom he had held naked in his arms.

In thus simplifying, he idealised her, and for all its sordid realism *Mme Bovary* is a poet's story. It has something of the universality of a Greek tragedy, something too of its dreadful justice. Mme Bovary is heroic in the completeness of her sin, in the terror of her fate. In the end she gives a kind of absolution. As she lies dying the priest is brought to her. "Ensuite il récita le Misereatur et l'indulgentiam, trempa son pouce droit dans l'huile et commença les onctions : d'abord sur les yeux, qu'avaient tant convoité toutes les somptuosités terrestres : puis sur les narines friandes de brises tièdes et de senteurs amoureuses ; puis sur la bouche, qui s'était ouverte pour le mensonge, qui avait gémi d'orgueil et crié dans la luxure ; puis sur les mains, qui se delectaient au contacts suaves, et enfin sur la plante des pieds, si rapides autrefois quand elle courait à l'assouvisance de ses désirs et qui maintenant ne marcheraient plus." So Mme Bovary was absolved.

A very different end awaited Mme Colet.

3: "LUI"

FLAUBERT was Louise's last lover. She had no more love affairs after she parted from him in 1854, but she had twenty-one more years to live. She was now forty-four. Her youth had gone, and with it her good looks and sexual charm. They had been of a kind almost entirely dependent on the colour and freshness of youth. Now her hair was fading, her complexion becoming florid, she was losing her figure. Her health was breaking up too. Her winter colds began earlier every year and stayed later. She fell a victim to a series of chills brought on by the least exertion or exposure. Worst of all, a worrying cough began to disturb her nights, to survive her colds, and at last became almost permanent. With the falling off of her looks, her health, and her lovers, the path of literature became less smooth. After the death of her husband it was more necessary than ever that she should make a living by her pen. Yet she found it increasingly difficult to get her articles accepted and her books published. The remaining years of her life were spent in a struggle against poverty and ill-health. It was attended, like the rest of Mme Colet's career,

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

with an incredible amount of fuss, affectation, and insensibility, yet at the same time with a courage and vigour which it is impossible not to admire.

Financially Louise had never been sound. The income produced by her husband's music-lessons and her own unaided literary efforts was, of course, very small, entirely inadequate to the support of a lady moving in the best literary circles of Paris. But whatever her income had been Louise would have had money difficulties. She was one of those women to whom they are as certain as love affairs. Not content with spending money, she positively threw it away. She gave up a pension on a fit of temper, and became entangled in the costly Recamier lawsuit without consulting one of her friends.

Her most prosperous years were those at the beginning of her connexion with Cousin. The philosopher took his obligations seriously and felt bound in honour or in love to see that his mistress's head was kept above water. He and Beranger contrived to keep an eye on her finances throughout the time of her liaison with Flaubert, getting back her pension for her when she had given it up, doing what could be done to save her from her own follies in the matter of the lawsuit, and when she had a little money trying to induce her to spend it sensibly or better still to save it.

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

It was Louise's wish that Flaubert should take on these friendly offices. On one occasion she sent him a letter from Cousin in which business affairs and affection were mingled, evidently in the hope that he would wait on her breaking off relations with Cousin, and himself take over the charge of her finances. Flaubert was grateful. "Thank you for sending me the philosopher's letter. I understand why you did it. It is yet another act of homage which you pay me, a sacrifice which you wish to make me. It is as if you were to say, 'Here is another whom I lay at your feet. You see that I don't want him, because it is you whom I adore ?' You give me everything, poor angel, your glory, your poetry, your heart, the love of the people who desire you." But though he was pleased and flattered at being preferred to Cousin he would not take his place. Flaubert was wilfully blind to the financial responsibility of having a mistress. At any mention of money from her the blood of the Norman peasants in his veins took alarm, and he thrust his heavy hands into his pockets and left them there. On one occasion Louise had sent him an album containing the autographs of the great men whom she had teased into writing for her, asking if he could sell it to one of his friends. Flaubert had refused to take the hint, saying bluntly that he did not know of any-one who could be likely to buy it. It was no

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

use. The philosopher must manage these affairs for her.

Unfortunately the philosopher finally withdrew in the same year as Flaubert himself, 1854. Cousin had long known that his share of Louise's affections was very small and very cold. He was getting too old and frail to bear these nerve-shattering scenes which formed so inevitable a part of any liaison with Mme Colet. He therefore determined to sever the connexion, at least as he put it nervously to Beranger, "for a time." With masculine cowardice he dared not face the horrors of the final scene and besought Beranger to undertake it for him. Beranger himself was rather nervous. He had acted as ambassador between the pair before and knew what it meant. The great thing was, he wrote, to have everything very clear and definite in his own mind before he approached Louise. The proposals which Cousin had sketched were far too vague. If he went with nothing but them in his mind he would be forced to enter into a discussion and then he would be beaten. Finally he got Cousin to make his terms more definite, and, like the good friend he was, interviewed the lady. After a month's negotiations it was finally settled that Louise was to receive 4,000 francs, paid in four instalments—in return she was to leave Cousin alone.

Thus the liaison of sixteen years was broken off.

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

Cousin could not keep away entirely however. In 1857 he was still to be found on Sunday afternoons in the untidy room on the second floor of the Rue de Sèvres. He took no part in the literary life or gossip which went on there, however. He would see Louise alone or not at all. As soon as anyone else arrived he stood up, shook hands gravely with his hostess and without a word or a glance to the newcomer, left the room solemnly, "his hands crossed on his stomach," says an observer, "as if he were carrying an invisible banner." "*L'illustre liaison du philosophe et la muse,*" remarks the same young man, "touchait à sa fin."

Unfortunately this fact was clear not only to enthusiastic young authors who still haunted the mature and now almost historic beauty, but to the substantial editors, publishers and men of letters on whom her bread and cheese depended. Mme Colet's manuscripts accompanied by a covering letter of her own were very different from Mme Colet's manuscripts supported by a covering letter from the Ministre de l'Instruction Publique. Louise could not understand the difference in her position. Anxious as she had been for the support and patronage of literary men she does not seem to have realized how very largely she owed her successes to their efforts. She could not understand why the Sainte-Beuve who in 1843 had secured the publica-

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

tion of anything she chose to write, who in chance meetings had treated her with a cordiality bordering on flattery, in 1853 not merely refused to write an article upon her when requested, but positively ordered his door to be shut in her face.

Mme Colet had her own explanation of course. In 1873, two years before her own death and several years after that of Sainte-Beuve, she gave it to the world. The work was nominally an appreciation of the late critic, but as so often happened with her, it turned out to be an article on Mme Colet herself, though in this case more especially of her relations with Sainte-Beuve. She begins with a long list of the compliments which she had received from him from time to time beginning “*chere poète, laissez moi vous appeler tout simplement ainsi,*” and ending with the statement that he knew her poems by heart and that they were worthy of a place in the Greek anthology. “If this was the case, why,” asks Louise, “why did the great critic who lavished on me so many pages of praise in manuscript, pages which I still keep, why did he never include me in his studies of contemporary women authors, where I think I may say without vanity that I ought to have figured? That is the question.”

The answer was not far to seek. The cause was the same as that had earned her the hostility of Alphonse Karr. Her irresistible but fastidious beauty. But it is

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

necessary to go back a little. Mme Colet gives a short though surprising sketch of her origin and girlhood. Her people belonged to the Greek colony of Marseilles and were still famous for their classical beauty. Her ancestors were descended from demi-gods, and had “baignés leur flancs dans l’Issus.” Her own grandmother seemed the reincarnation of those Athenian marbles which are the admiration of the ages and Louise was the living image of her. Louise’s own wild girlhood was passed in retirement in an old château in Provence. She was transplanted thence “very young [26] and inexperienced to Paris, bearing in her soul the legacy of the demi-gods, her ancestors, *le triple amour de l’art, du beau et de la lumière.*”

This farouche but exquisite beauty at once attracted the roving fancy of Sainte-Beuve. The lady herself was charmed by the intellect of the critic, but “surprised and disgusted almost to stupefaction and as it were frozen in my sympathy by the ungracious envelope which hid so many exquisite subtleties and intellectual flames” [*sic.*]. Her low opinion of his physical charms was repeated to Sainte-Beuve by common “friends.” Hence these tears.

In all the wealth of detail which she gives in her story of her relations with Sainte-Beuve, Mme Colet omits the two letters which she received from him

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

dated 4th and 7th June, 1853, and which practically put an end to their relations.

The first begins :—

“ Madam,—

“ I am at a loss to understand the letter which you have done me the honour to write to me. It seems, indeed, that I have in some way slighted you and your talent. I do not think that there is any law which obliges me to speak in public of your poems ; and I have the right, Madam, to find your insistence most strange. What ! I must, it seems under pain of appearing to slight you, explain in public exactly where I admire and where I cease to admire you, where I consider that you have force and ability, and where I am shocked at not meeting the delicacy and modesty which become the expression of the feelings. . . . If, as a woman of the world and of society, you ask from me compliments and praise, I am quite ready to give them to you, certain moreover that your talent will always merit them to some extent ; if as a woman of letters, you hold, as on this occasion, your knife to my throat, to force me to say aloud what I think, I revolt—or rather I beg for mercy, and I beg you, Madam, to allow me to remain polite, respectful, and full of admiration for your talent, and your personality generally, without having to enter into critical distinctions.”

Most editors, however, ceased to observe even the

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

forms of politeness in their dealings with Mme Colet. There now began for her the wretched life of a literary tramp, hawking her wares from one newspaper office to another, waiting in one cold ante-room after another only to meet in the end evasion, or a blank refusal, positive rudeness. A passage in *L'Italie des Italiens*, nominally a report of a conversation with the poet Manzoni, gives a picture of her life at this time. Beneath the purple patches there is irresistible sincerity and pathos.

“The working evenings, when some gleams of inspiration shone, were my happy hours. But when day returned and I had to carry the finished work through the mud and the rain of Paris to editors, publishers or theatre managers, then my agony began. How many fruitless journeys! How many wasted hours! How cruelly appointments which I had arranged were broken. ‘What place,’ they ask, ‘do you occupy in the Parisian world (where talent is measured by importance of position and fortune), that one should take notice of your arrival? Come another day, perhaps then you may meet one of your omnipotent judges.’ The return to one’s lodging is sad, discouraged enough, but it is necessary to begin on the morrow the vain excursions of the day before. . . . It is the time when one is certain to find the editors of newspapers at their desks, and correcting the proof of their early editions. You arrive: the

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

editor whose paper has a poor circulation or whose article has been badly received, avenges himself with airs of importance. He brutally bangs the door which an office boy has half opened while saying your name ; he calls out angrily, ‘I’m not in.’ The more affable editors ask you to wait ; you wait in a room where the clerks work, or lounge round a table covered with green baize and with French and foreign papers lying about. The gentlemen, each with a cigar in his mouth, are chattering, and do not even get up when you enter to offer you a chair. You sit down in a corner ; you take a newspaper to give yourself a countenance ; your feet are wet, your head on fire and your back frozen by a door which opens every minute. At last the editor receives you ; he promises to have your manuscript read ; ‘but if you have written a masterpiece,’ he says, ‘you can’t appear for a long time ; the paper has copy for more than a year.’ You try to give some details about the work which you have brought ; you think that you may be able to touch and convince your judge and get some hope out of him. Somebody interrupts, and you go away taking nothing but a wretched uncertainty with you.”

There was not much to be gained by this sort of thing and at last Mme Colet took the safer, but humbler methods of augmenting her income. She began to write for the fashion papers. She appears

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

to have made no secret of this among her friends, if anything she rather paraded it as an interesting and pathetic expedient of poverty. A friend of de Mirecourt found her one day weeping bitterly as she corrected the proofs of a fashion article in a ladies' paper. Louise was especially noted as a connoisseur of hats. Large numbers, as many as twenty at a time, were sent to her to review, and she seems to have been allowed to retain them afterwards as part payment for her articles. They were kept in a large cupboard shrouded by a green curtain in the innermost sitting-room, where she received her friends. One day to the amazed interest of the young Baron Plautel the curtain was drawn aside, the locked doors opened, and the treasure revealed, row upon row of hats of the latest fashion and the richest material. No wonder Mme Colet was "une des femmes les mieux coiffées de Paris." Louise selected two hats which she handed to the visitor with her most engaging smile. "Will you try to sell them for me?" she asked. The young man eagerly undertook the errand and disposed of them easily enough, as he told afterwards with a grin in the "quartier latin." Maxime Du Camp was not so obliging. He refused to attempt to dispose of any of the forty hats which she once confided to him that she had on her hands at the moment. He held her literary articles up to ridicule in his "*souvenirs littéraires.*" "Prose

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

brought in little," he writes, "Poetry nothing. She took up her best pen and composed fashion articles. "Elle vauta des couturiers, des cordonniers des corsetières et des gautières ; elle célébra des cold cream, exalta des eaux de toilette, et chanta le velouté des nitrates de bismuth que l'on déguise en poudre de riz."

In 1859 there came a little gust of prosperity which freed Mme Colet, for the time at least, from singing the odious praises of coldcream and hairwash. She saw an opportunity, so small and so remote that scarcely any other woman would have regarded it as such. But it was enough for Louise. With her usual reckless courage she rushed in and seized it. She wrote *Lui*.

But to go back a little. During the first three months of 1859, George Sand's *Elle et Lui* had come out in the *Revue de deux Mondes*. It was now twenty-six years since she had gone to Venice with de Musset and returned with Pagello. It was five years since de Musset had published his own account of the story in the *Enfant du Siècle*. It was two years since he had died, worn out at forty-six. For twenty-six years gossip had raged about this mysterious liaison. For twenty-six years George Sand had been called variously the guardian angel and the evil demon of de Musset. And for twenty-six years she had kept silence. Now at last for some reason

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

she decided to break it—to give her own account to the world.

The story of these lovers has a peculiar glamour, even at the distance of nearly a century. The effect which it produced at the time as it came out piece-meal, mysterious, controversial, in Paris, where the chief actors still lived and were well known, can hardly be imagined. Excitement was high enough after the publication of *Elle et Lui*. It was raised to frenzy when in the same year it was followed by Paul de Musset's *Lui et Elle*. This account, written to vindicate Alfred's memory from the aspersions cast upon it in *Elle et Lui*, was alleged to be an almost verbal transcript of the account which Alfred had given Paul immediately on his return from Italy. Whether this was the case or not it served to maintain public interest in the story at fever height. It was plain that any publication with a claim to first-hand information on the subject would command a large sale.

Now, Louise had met George Sand once or twice, but she had known de Musset personally, and for a short time—intimately. There is no doubt that in 1852 for a few months at least Louise had seen a good deal of de Musset. Flaubert in his letters of this year makes several references to the fact that de Musset was frequenting the house, and in his phlegmatic way appeared to encourage the intimacy.

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

A poem undoubtedly written by de Musset describes a tender and inimitably de Musset scene between himself and Louise in the Jardin des Plantes. In 1857 Mme Colet sold to the Baron Plautel for 160 francs a long satire on various members of the Académie Française written by Alfred's own hand in her own house some years previously. The intimacy from all accounts was of short duration, and exactly how far it went would be difficult to say. According to Louise it never passed the bounds of strictest propriety, though de Musset's biographers are inclined to think otherwise. One thing is certain, however, that like most of Mme Colet's friendships it ended in a row. De Musset tired of the affair long before the lady, but his unconcealed indifference did not prevent her from coming persistently to visit him. Finally Alfred sent down to the flat porter a miniature of Mme Colet, with instructions that whenever the original called he was not at home. It was no use. Louise caught sight of the portrait, swept past the frightened porter into the room of Alfred himself, and portrait in hand demanded an explanation. Alfred was, as usual in those days, prostrate on the couch in a darkened room. This did not prevent Mme Colet from making a scene. She stormed, she wept, she threatened, entreated. Alfred only answered by a pale shiver. At length his nurse, Mme Martelet,

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

came to the rescue of the poet and drove the furious muse from the house. This story was soon common property among the literary gossips. But Mme Colet does not appear to have borne any malice. In fact, the episode seems to have slipped her memory entirely. After his death she always spoke of de Musset as one of her devoted admirers and herself as his guardian angel. Her one regret was that she had not known him earlier. "If I had known him as a young man," she remarked to Baron Plautel, "I should have made him the greatest poet of the French language. I could have protected his genius against the storms of life as one shelters a lighted candle with the hand in carrying it from one room to another."

Anyhow, whatever the nature of her recollections, the middle of 1859 was the golden hour to bring them forward. Louise recognised this. Returning to the solitude of the inner room with the hats, old letters and hairwash, Mme Colet put on a none too clean white dressing-gown, let down her golden hair, and in an incredibly short number of weeks emerged with a complete novel. This novel was to be the final version, the last word of the *Sand-Musset* story, the version which Alfred himself had told Louise as they sat *tête-à-tête* in summer evenings of 1852 in the Rue St. Sèvres. Going one point better than Paul de Musset with his *Lui et Elle*, and two points

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

than George Sand with her *Elle et Lui*, she called her novel simply *Lui*. It was to be sacred to the memory of Alfred alone.

Of course, like everyone else who figured in the de Musset story, Mme Colet was greatly abused. Du Camp's condemnation is typical of the kind of thing that was said about her by contemporary and all subsequent critics. "Certainly every one is free to write his own history, but I think that George Sand and Paul de Musset would have done better to have kept silence. . . . Still, it must be admitted that George Sand in defending herself and P. de Musset in defending his brother have neither of them, in pleading 'pro domo sua,' overstepped their rights, but what is to be said of Louise Colet, who rushed in, elbowing her way, and forced herself between the author of *Rolla* and the author of *Consuelo* with a triumphant 'me voilà'?" Still as she was there, it was natural that people should want to know what she had to say. It was not likely that appetites sharpened by *Elle et Lui* and *Lui et Elle* would be able to resist this last morsel. The book ran through four editions in a year and brought its author enough money to travel to Italy in comfort in 1860.

The surprising thing is not so much that the book ran through four editions in 1859 as that it is now out of print. When Cavour told Louise that he had spent a night in reading it in all probability the old

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

diplomat was speaking the truth. It is one of those novels which one sometimes finds by accident on the kitchen table or in country lodgings, which it is almost impossible to put down. It is not in the ordinary sense a good novel. Faults of grammar and construction lie thick on the surface. It is based on a theory which would not survive for a moment on the seas of real life. The sentiment is false and sickly. It appeals to a side of us that good taste, common sense, education repress but cannot extinguish.

Unfortunately Mme Colet had a passion for poetry and serious literature. Had she turned her gifts to the writing of sentimental novels she would have trebled the revenue brought in by poetry and the praise of hairwash. But this does not seem to have occurred to her. She only wrote one novel—*Lui*—and into it is distilled the fine flower of her life and talents. The book is a delicious exhalation of Mme Colet—with all her peculiar charm, her peculiar faults, the meridional exuberance and voluptuousness, the love of life, and high spirits, the complete freedom from all restraints imposed by good manners, self-respect, or respect for the feelings of others, her incredible silliness. Above all, it benefits from her transcendent gift for seeing herself and her own affairs transfigured in a rosy romantic haze. For needless to say *Lui* is no mere réchauffé

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

of the story of de Musset and George Sand. Louise had other objects in view besides wiping the dust from the monument of Alfred de Musset, and indulging her jealousy of George Sand. She also desired to let the world know what a beautiful, much desired, yet much misunderstood woman was Mme Colet, how Flaubert maltreated her, how de Musset adored her in vain, yet as ardently as he adored George Sand.

In spite of its title, Alfred is not really the hero of *Lui*. The novel has no hero, merely a heroine, the Marquise Stéphanie de Rostand, alias Mme Colet herself. But Mme Colet ennobled, glorified, surrounded with a halo and seen through a haze, seen through her own eyes. The Marquise is described thus : "Her figure was still slender. Her white neck, and her beautiful expressive head with its crown of abundant gold hair glittered, so to speak, above the numerous folds of a violet dress. The full delicate folds of the silky tissue enveloped her gracefully. She was leaning back in a garden-chair with her two little clasped hands supporting her bent knee. In this attitude of the Sapho of Pradier, her wide falling sleeves revealed as far as the elbow two arms perfectly modelled and dazzlingly white. The warm breath of this magnificent spring evening flushed her cheeks a delicate pink. I contemplated her completely ravished and

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

said to myself, ‘She might still be adored.’ But the Marquise had fallen on evil days. She was a widow, and a disastrous lawsuit had just swallowed up her fortune. The vast ancestral mansion of the Rostands in the Faubourg S. Germain had been sold up, but the rich people who had bought it still allowed the Marquise to rent five rooms on the fourth floor. Here she lived with her family portraits, one faithful retainer and 2,000 francs a year.” Yet the Marquise was not poor, for she had two treasures, or as she puts it, “two opulences, two splendours which shone on, and illuminated my mean and vulgar cares like a bright sun on the plains. I had a magnificent child, a son [daughter in real life], who radiated laughter and movement around me, and I had in my heart a profound love, blind as hope, and sustaining as faith. I expected,” she continues, “everything from this love, and I believed in it as the devout believe in God. It can be imagined how it gave me strength to live in what the world calls poverty, and what indifference I felt for everything except it, and my joys as a mother. Nevertheless the man who inspired this love in me was a kind of myth to my friends. He was only to be seen at my house at rare intervals. He lived far away in the country, working like one of art’s fanatics at a great book, so he said. I was the confidante of this unknown genius. Every day

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

I received his letters, and every two months when a part of his book was finished, I became once again his adored recompense, his radiant joy, the fleeting frenzy (*le frénésie passagère*) of his heart, which, strange to say, opened and shut at will to these powerful sensations. He seemed so indifferent for himself and for others to everything except the abstractions of art and ‘*le beau*,’ that he acquired for me, at the distance at which we lived from one another, a kind of idealized greatness. How could he have noticed my straightened circumstances, he who attached no value to anything except the ideal ? ”

Anyhow, in the long absence of Léonce, the Marquise was a little bored and lonely, shut away on the top floor of the ancestral mansion, with only the family portraits, the faithful servant, and the magnificent child for company. It was quite an event when she was introduced to the famous poet “Albert de Lincel” at a friend’s house. It was still more of an event when the next day he came to call. It happened in this way. The Marquise was sitting at her open window looking dreamily over the roofs and towers of the Faubourg S. Germain. “Suddenly,” she says, “I felt a hand pull the folds of my dress. It was my old servant, who said with her usual broad smile, ‘Here is a gentleman, m’am.’ I turned my head, and found myself face to face with Albert de Lincel.

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

"He was paler than on the evening before, and so much out of breath that he seemed as if he was going to faint. I took his hand and made him sit down. He fell, utterly exhausted, into an arm-chair. 'You see,' he said at last, 'that I have not been long in returning your visit.'" He then admired the view from the windows and the portraits of the beautiful women and distinguished men from whom Stéphanie was descended. "But," continues Mme Colet, "while we talked his voice grew so hoarse and his oppression so great that I said suddenly, 'I am very inhospitable not to have offered you a glass of sweetened water after your climb up my four flights of stairs.' And, taking a glass ornamented with gold stars which I always used myself, I offered it to him full of sugared water.

"He began to laugh like a child. 'What, Marquise, do you think that you will revive my strength by this sickly beverage ?'

"Would you like me to add a little orange water to it ?' I asked.

"Better and better,' he said, laughing more loudly.

"Oh, I see,' I returned, 'I have some excellent Spanish chocolate, it does not take long to make. Allow me to offer you some. I dare not suggest tea or coffee, it is too stimulating.'

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

"‘Do not try, Marquise, but simply tell them to bring me a generous glass of wine.’

“Born and bred in the South, I, like most women from hot climates, had never lifted a drop of wine to my lips. I had brought up my son on the same régime, and since my ruin had no cellar. I told Albert this, adding that my servant alone drank wine in the house.” Finally this “*vin de cuisine*” was brought, and as Albert drank, his colour deepened and his eyes brightened with fresh life. He even urged the benefits of alcohol on the Marquise. “‘Horror,’ I cried, laughing—never would I soil my lips with this bitter smelling drink. Give me the delicate aroma of the lemon and the orange. I remember that when the heavy feet of the wine-pressers trod out the grapes at my father’s château I used to escape far away and sit on some hillock to breathe the pure air of heaven.

“‘With your hair dyed purple and gold in the sun you would have made a very beautiful Erigone,’ he replied gallantly.”

So the interview floated on, puffed by compliments delicate as the breath of the Marquise’s native oranges and lemons.

The call was a great success and was repeated many times in the next few weeks. At last the day came when, although it was late and more than time to go, Albert clung to the Marquise’s hand

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

and begged to be allowed to remain two or three hours longer, promising to sit still and remain quite quiet. He was so pale and so distraught that Stéphanie had not the heart to refuse him. "Besides," she adds, "in spite of my own preoccupation I found a great charm in his company."

"Stay then if you like," I said. He took my hand, and holding it in his own, thanked me.

"We were lighted by a dim lamp with a rose-pink shade. The full moon hung opposite my windows and cast its pale beams across the pane. No sound from the outside world floated up to us. A large fire blazed on the hearth. This mingling of soft warmth and light inspired a kind of tenderness and involuntary reverie. He still held my hand, and remained so motionless that but for his wide-open eyes I should have thought he slept. I dared not move for fear of drawing from his lips some all too passionate word. I felt very uneasy at the silence we were keeping, yet I did not know how to break it."

That, of course, was the difficulty, these "all too passionate words." For, needless to say, Albert soon fell desperately in love with Stéphanie. But in vain. She would not yield to his entreaties. Did she not belong to Léonce the cold, the self-contained, the fifty miles distant, but Léonce the adored of Stéphanie? Still, in his absence, it was pleasant to be worshipped by a distinguished poet, and Albert's

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

visits were not discouraged. One evening, as they sat alone, in order to distract the poet's attention from her own charms, the Marquise said : "Parlez moi de l'amour de votre jeunesse dont le monde a tout parle." So Albert de Lincel told the love story of himself and the famous woman novelist, Antonia Back.

His story occupies about half of *Lui* and is written with all Mme Colet's peculiar voluptuousness and verve. It contains, however, little that is not to be found in the already existing versions of the story. It follows most closely that of Paul de Musset, the version in which the story is told with least disguise and also with greatest animus against George Sand. Mme Colet goes even further than Paul de Musset, and not content with making George cold, sensual, faithless and pedantic, makes her positively ludicrous. For instance, Albert one evening finds Antonia writing what he suspects is a love letter to Tiberio (Pagello, of course). He asks to see it, but Antonia, instead of replying, pretends to be sick into the basin at her elbow. She then crushes up her letter, throws it into the basin, and pours the whole contents out of the window. Surely de Musset, however drunk or peevish, would have been incapable of inventing or relating such a story.

Yet there is strong internal evidence that de Musset actually did talk to Louise about George

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

Sand. There are certain passages in which Albert speaks of Antonia which are not to be found in any of the other three versions and yet which it is extremely unlikely that Mme Colet should have invented. For this reason—Mme Colet's thesis is that George was a tiresome and pedantic woman and that Alfred's chief reason in telling the story was to prove that he was thoroughly tired of and disgusted with her and that all his hopes and affections were now centred on Louise herself. Yet, forgetting this, she puts into Albert's mouth, or rather lets fall from it unawares, praises so respectful, almost reverent—reminiscences so passionate and tender that they surely must have come from the lips of George's lover. It is impossible to believe that the jealous woman who had the impertinence to consider herself her rival should have invented such phrases for her lover. "Never, never," says Albert, "had I tasted a love so beautiful, so ardent, so complete. I felt an exaltation, a delirium, the joy of a child, a tenderness that was almost maternal combined with the strength of a lion. I had generous and superb moments of exaltation when I seemed to clasp the whole of creation in my arms. I was twenty times more of a poet than before I had known her." Or again: "In loving Antonia I was proud of being in love. She was beautiful, and she had an intelligence equal to my own. When a woman is gifted with a

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

natural genius, that is, a genius which is involuntary and sacred, it draws a poet like a blood tie. With such women only can he taste the double and complete voluptuousness of body and soul." Surely Mme Colet must have repeated this unawares.

She repeats a good deal of Alfred's conversation which she would have suppressed had she realized its significance. Like many insensitive and talkative egoists she often relates a snub, a slight, even a definite insult which has been offered her under the impression that it is a compliment, or anyhow is interesting and redounds to her credit. Her theory is that Albert de Lincel passionately and respectfully adored the Marquise, who refused him owing to her love for the absent Léonce. Reading between the lines, or indeed, not even between the lines, of *Lui* it is quite clear that Alfred finding himself in need of a woman approached Mme Colet as one known to be easily accessible, if not absolutely venal. In spite of its setting of family portraits and ancestral mansion, the conversation which took place at the second meeting of Stéphanie and Albert is sinister.

Albert [going]. "Oh, Marquise, you little know where you are driving me."

Stéphanie. "But to sleep peacefully, I hope."

Albert. "Peacefully, you answer like a coquette, for at your age one is no longer naïve."

As Albert is going Stéphanie offers her hand.

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

"No," he answered, rejecting it, "for within an hour I shall be caressed by venal hands." On another occasion, as he was returning from the Opera in a cab with Stéphanie, Albert suddenly seized her in his arms. "'Albert, dear Albert, what is the matter,' I murmured, feeling my terror increase.

"'I have had enough of these torments,' he answered in a heavy, sinister voice, 'you only put on that dress to tempt me,' and brushing me with his head he tried to tear the muslin which I was wearing with his teeth.

"'For pity's sake,' I said, 'leave me alone, you frighten me.'—'Very well, be frightened, what does it matter? I have suffered enough and I am not going to suffer any more. You shouldn't dress like the women who tempt us and who are kinder and more honest in their looseness than you in your reserve. Come along, come along, my beauty, the lion has roared and you must submit.'" Finally Stéphanie had to throw herself from the cab in order to escape. This was the de Musset who cried for an hour on end because he had received a cold glance from the Princess Belgiojoso, and dared not even tell her so as he took her down to dinner, but wrote an account to be passed on, of course, to her confidante. Alfred knew well enough how to make love to proud and intelligent ladies. He evidently did not put

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

the original of the Marquise Stéphanie de Rostand  
in this class.

Louise did not realize this. It never crossed her mind that she was being insulted. In fact, she found Albert's method of wooing entirely satisfactory. "Oh, poor Albert," writes the Marquise.

"In your seeming madness it was you who were in love, you who were inspired. The other (Léonce) far away, far from me in his laborious pride and eternal self-analysis, he did not love. Love to him was no more than a dissertation, a dead letter."

Here the poor woman finally gives herself away. In her posthumous enthusiasm for de Musset she turns against Flaubert, and the memory of Flaubert. One evening the Marquise showed the love letters of Léonce to Albert. She watched him anxiously while he read. She could read in his face as in a mirror every thought of his soul. She saw in him "the disdain of genius for the fastidious dissertations on art and on glory mixed headlong with love; a scornful pity for the monstrous personality of Léonce. Sometimes something bitter and distrustful was revealed in the piercing irony of the glance which seemed to strike as with a dagger certain faults of breeding which the letters of Léonce revealed." At last the oracle spoke: "'Chère Stéphanie,' he said, looking at me sadly, 'you are loved by the brain of this man, not by his heart.'—

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

‘Don’t abuse him to me,’ I said, ‘I shall suspect you.’

“‘Don’t think that I am jealous of this Léonce,’ he replied, lifting his head proudly. ‘No, I am reassured, for I am better than he, better than he by the sincerity of my emotions!’” He then ran over the chief points in the character of Léonce. His lack of genius—no genius could be so slow. Albert had known a poet who had shut himself up for two years to produce an imitation of a poem which he (Albert) had written in half an hour. Léonce’s novel, of which he had been in travail for forty-eight months, would be nothing but a heavy and flagrant compilation of Balzac. His pride—with what arrogance he judged contemporary writers to whom he would never be equal—Sainte-Beuve, for instance. His insensibility—his heart was the corollary of his brain, an organ terribly dilated but insensible, a great empty lump where everything goes in and nothing comes out as in the hump of Harlequin. Philistine—in spite of all his talk about art he was *bourgeois* to the core. Lastly, his abominable treatment of Louise—especially in not sending her money when he knew she wanted it.

“While Albert spoke,” says Stéphanie, “I felt the kind of agony that a woman, that only a mother, can understand. It was something like the pangs of a miscarriage when the dead weight which yester-

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

day we felt moving is detached from our living entrails ; all the maternal instincts revolt, one would like to keep and always carry this dear and painful burden, but it cannot be, it leaves us while torturing us. Thus under the caustic words of Albert I seemed to feel my love dissolve and fall."

Her love for Flaubert was dead. Moreover it had always been an illusion. Flaubert had never been what she thought him. The adored Léonce suddenly sinks to the level of a selfish and talentless Philistine on whom Louise had wasted the best years of her life.

So Mme Colet commits the one sin unpardonable in a lover, and blasphemes her love. So she earned the epitaph of Maxime du Camp, "Ici gît celle qui a ridiculisé Alfred de Musset, vilipendé Gustave Flaubert, etc." But she did more harm to herself than to Flaubert. She showed once and for ever the barrenness and littleness of her own soul. Showed that her emotions, after all, belonged to the realms of sentiment and sensuality. Love and passion, in spite of all her storms and tears, had passed by the poor Muse.

#### 4: TRAVELS IN ITALY

*L*UI brought money, but unlike Mme Colet's earlier works it did not bring friends. Even she would probably not have made quite so free with the reputation of eminent people unless she had known that all hopes of intercourse with them were at an end. At last Louise seems to have recognized her defeat, and have given up any attempt of keeping a niche in the literary society of Paris. The city of her girlish dreams, of her maturer triumphs, threatened to become the scene of a poor and friendless old age.

Of course Louise made the best of it. In her own account, her eclipse, due to a conspiracy of literary men piqued by her virtue and jealous of her talent, and of women jealous of her conquests and her charm, is no less interesting and romantic than her earlier triumphs. But this did not alter the fact that Paris was no longer a place where Mme Colet could enjoy herself. Moreover, no ties bound her to it. Her lovers had left her, her husband had died, her daughter was in a convent.

Mme Colet's daughter was unexpectedly satisfactory. She seems to have inherited her mother's

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

good looks but not her temperament. In spite of an upbringing as injudicious as can well be imagined she grew into a gentle, amiable, intelligent young woman. She bore the name of Colet, but inherited nothing else from the music master. Cousin to the end of his life took a frank and active interest in her welfare. When her mother was impossible to deal with, he found an ally in Louise's sister-in-law, Mme Sidonie Colet. This lady, in addition to having a normal share of common sense, was really fond of the child and anxious to help her. It was difficult of course, as she writes to Cousin, "I love this child like a sister, but I dare not show it. Her mother would certainly resent it, and would accuse me of having stolen her child's heart." Henrietta had even harder work. "She fulfils," writes her reputed aunt, "she fulfils admirably the difficult task which God has set her in avoiding scenes with her mother." Cousin was in a position to understand the difficulty of this task, and determined to spare the child. At last he persuaded Louise to allow him to send her to school in a convent at Verneuil. Mme Colet, of course, did her duty in the shape of periodical visits to the convent, long letters to the authorities, and occasional scenes. But these duties were not very arduous. There was nothing in the situation of the "magnifique enfant" to keep the most devoted mother in Paris.

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

So everything urged Louise to travel. But where? The question did not exist. There was only one country which could tempt the Muse—l'Italie. She had never actually been there, but regarded it always as a “poetic fatherland whose language I had heard about my cradle, whose blue sea and brilliant sky had ravished my infant eyes.” Moreover, Italy at the moment was the centre of attention in Europe. In the early months of 1859, France had thrilled with delight at the victories of Napoleon III and Victor Emmanuel over the Austrians at Magenta, Solferino and Martino. When these victories were followed in July by the amazing peace of Villa-franca by which Venice was left under Austrian rule and the French armies were withdrawn across the Alps, democratic opinion was outraged. Louise was nothing if not democratic. As Barbey d'Aurevilly said, “She might have sat for a statue of the Republican Muse, ‘*Aux mamelles puissantes.*’” She swelled with indignation at the betrayal of her “poetic fatherland” and wrote “*Un dithyramb sur le grand émotion du moment.*” It consists of over thirty verses, of which the following is characteristic:—

“Aux armes l'Enfant de Venice  
L'enflamme l'esprit de Manin  
Florence, Parme, Ancone, Pise,  
Brisez un despotism nain.”

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

She “had occasion to show it to the Minister of the Interior, who shook his head and said it was ‘an appeal to insurrection in Italy, the publication of which he would never permit in the French papers.’” Mme Colet never lost faith in the Italians. As she said at a dinner-party : “They know how to suffer and to die. They will make a rod out of their own wills, their own intelligence, and their own bodies ; they will henceforth be the glory of the world and not its laughing-stock.”

When the first opportunity offered she determined to visit the heroic people. “To judge for myself of the resurrection of Italy, of this Italy which still protests against death by the continuity of its genius, by its beauty, by its artists, its poets, its savants, its inventors, by the imagination of its populace, by the skill of its workmen,” etc., etc.

So on a foggy morning in October, 1859, Mme Colet, surrounded by a large number of trunks, brown-paper parcels and hat-boxes, left the Gare du Lyon en route for Italy. The journey was delightful. The thought of leaving behind a cold and hostile Paris and travelling towards the land of “sunshine and freedom” gave new youth and vigour to the jaded muse. She watched the fields, forests and châteaux fly past in an ecstasy. It was even better when she reached her native South. Her fame had gone before her. Mayors and their wives came to

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

the station to meet her, landowners asked her to stay, the local newspapers mentioned her arrival in the most flattering terms. Tearful and tender, she revisited the scenes of her childhood, giving freest play to the imagination. She wrote a long poem on the bridge where a young man had come every day for seven years to watch her pass on her way to school. Every day he had grown paler and more languishing until at last he had died for hopeless love. On his death-bed he had sent her two orange-trees in pots in order that—

“On my beloved head  
That fragrance might be shed  
With which in vain he sought to grace my life.”

Louise also visited a surprising number of castles which had belonged to her ancestors, shedding a tear or a verse in each. On one occasion she was driven out by the proprietor, “a Belgian manufacturer without entrails or intelligence.” He met her in the morning musing in the grounds, and somewhat peremptorily ordered her out of them. Louise, however, made a détour and meeting the lady of the house tearfully asked if she might “revoir une dernière fois la chambre de ma mère.” This request was coldly refused, but Mme Colet was not easily turned from the ashes of her fathers. She flung herself against the door, and tried to force her

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

way into the hall. At this moment, however, the owner reappeared and placing his enormous form between Mme Colet and her ancestral portals literally pushed her off the premises. Louise was dishevelled but not daunted. "I went away," she writes, "sad and grave, thinking that the great Shakespeare was right and that the most heart-rending scenes of life have always their ridiculous side."

Such rebuffs were rare in the South, however. As a rule people were pleased to make the acquaintance of a lady whose books were in the circulating library and whose name had been mentioned in the Paris papers. The poor Muse expanded like a neglected flower put at last into water. Her cheeks grew rounder and redder, her hair took on a new gloss, memories of past loves came thick and fast, verses flowed constantly from her pen. But the land of sunshine and liberty was calling, and Mme Colet hurried southwards to Italy.

Here fresh triumphs awaited her. Milan was full of famous men and grand ladies, and Louise was introduced to nearly all of them. She gives a most imposing list of the people who came to visit her during a short illness which confined her to the house for ten days. For all these illustrious people, Louise, self-constituted ambassadress of France, had some word of praise, encouragement or sympathy from her native country. She told the cynical and

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

melancholy Leopardi that he was too humble about his own country, and too blind to the defects of the French. She clasped the wasted hands of Poerio newly escaped from the Neapolitan prisons exclaiming, "So you are Poerio! To me you are a glorious symbol! I have wept over your long tortures; I have quivered with joy at your deliverance, I have applauded the ovation given to you by England." She would have grasped the heroic hand of Garibaldi and "exchanged with him the noblest and strongest of human sentiments, sympathy," but he had gone to bed early the night she called, and the next morning left for Caprera. Mme Colet was inconsolable. "These are the sorrows of us poets, who live on emotion and sentiments," she writes. She had to wait a whole year before she could grasp that heroic hand, deliver that kindly message. But in the end she did it, as will be seen.

The fullest joys of the artistic temperament were reserved for Venice. As the train approached the lagoons Mme Colet had a "*saisissement d'artiste*" which lasted almost without intermission over the several months of her stay there. "As the first lagoon came in sight," she writes, "I hung out of the window and looked eagerly. I passed from left to right of the carriage in an attempt to take in the entire horizon with the rapid movements of a caged animal. . . . Before me lay the fantastic city

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

floating on the sea like a Greek goddess. I thought I was in a dream which would soon vanish. . . . I was lost in admiration and surprise. I forgot my companion and cried like a happy child in the presence of something which fascinates it. ‘How beautiful it is! my God, how beautiful it is!’ The train stopped. We were at the station and I was roused from my ecstasy by the irritating business of passports and customs.” But only for a moment. The ecstasy began again when she set foot in a gondola.

Eager and indefatigable she visited the churches, palaces, picture galleries, the remote islands, the narrow canals which every one visits and every one falls in love with who goes to Venice. Louise added a set of shrines of her own, however.

She found out the room in the Hôtel Danieli occupied by de Musset and George Sand, and remained there for a whole morning to muse and weep. She could have remained in Venice for the rest of her life to muse and weep, but it was not to be. Politically, Venice in 1859 was a backwater and Louise was not one to stay in a backwater. It was in the North and Centre that events were really moving. Victor Emmanuel was to open the Parliament at Turin on March 31, 1860. “All Italy was going,” writes Louise, “the mighty heart of the nation seemed to beat there, so to speak.” Mme

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

Colet hastened towards it. She obtained a ticket for the ceremony and was infinitely moved. “Cries of *vive le roi, vive l’Italie*, came from every mouth. What joy, what strength, what unity, what prestige of triumph!” She called on Cavour and congratulated him.

A few days later the king went to Florence and Mme Colet followed. She had constituted herself, as she said to one of the Florentine deputies, “one of the very humble historians of your King, and since I have had the good fortune to be present at his triumphal entry into all the capitals of Italy, I think I am bound to describe all the fêtes of which he is hero, and to contradict by my true account the false tales of the enemies of Italy.” At a ball at the Pitti palace she was very nearly presented to Victor Emmanuel, but at the last moment the King refused. It was most extraordinary. She had overheard him commenting on her appearance to his companion, the Princess Marie Bonaparte, in terms which Louise’s modesty forbade her to repeat. But when the Princess had asked permission to present her the King had replied, “What should I have to say to a Muse? I would rather look at her than talk to her.” “I have never solicited an interview with Victor Emmanuel,” says Mme Colet naïvely, “either before that evening or since, though during my long visit to Italy I have often found myself in his presence. I

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

have always said to myself, ‘ What would be the good ? ’ ” She insinuates that with all his admirable qualities she thought the king rather a bore. Had he been interested in poetry or literature, or even if he had been the patron of works of art—but as it was—no, it really was not worth Mme Colet’s while.

She enjoyed herself in Florence immensely. Her daughter, the “ magnifique enfant,” now become the “ vierge de quinze ans,” had come out to her for her holidays and gave her mother an added excuse for plunging deep into the social pleasures of the Florentine spring. But with all the music, the laughter, the flowers, the city was big with rumours. Towards the end of May they took shape.

One afternoon in May, 1860, Louise heard the paper-boys of Florence call “ News of Garibaldi.” She bought a paper and read that Garibaldi was sailing towards Sicily. She was quite overpowered. “ As I read the paper,” she writes, “ I felt suddenly a curious dizziness, a cloud descended before my eyes, it seemed as if the Giotto tower was shaking and toppling towards me. When I tried to walk my legs refused to carry me; although I had only a few steps to go to the hotel, I was obliged to take a cab.” In the evening she had a large number of visitors. Of each arrival she asked, “ What news do you bring ? ” They brought none. “ The tele-

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

graph is silent," was their only answer. "Nothing from Sicily, nothing from Turin." But the next morning there was news : "Garibaldi has landed at Marsala." Louise leapt out of bed. She longed for a son whom she could embrace, crying, "These are the men you must imitate. This is what men should be." She longed to be a man herself. Then nothing would have kept her from this fête of imagination and liberty. "As it was," she says, "I was doubly hampered by my woman's clothes and my delicate health."

But when Garibaldi had conquered Sicily and landed in Calabria, even crinolines and illness were unable to restrain her. At Genoa she writes : "The patriotic enthusiasm of Italy overcomes me on these beautiful evenings where the fête of nature completed that of liberty. Palermo and Naples called me. The steamers gliding southward before me cried 'Come.' What a spectacle for a poet to see a people newly delivered, joyous, proud, armed!" She determined to go. It meant an enormous amount of trouble. But at last she worried Cavour into giving her a safe conduct and a passage in a gun-boat going south. It meant leaving the child behind. Naples was no place for a "vierge de quinze ans." It was a cruel separation, but Louise faced it. The child was instantly packed off to Nice, where her long-suffering "aunt" met her. At the

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

moment of starting Louise had a second's doubt. "Could anything in the world," she asked herself, "could anything offer me the same ecstasy as Lake Maggiore?" Then suddenly a warm breeze from the south blew in gusts and murmured to her heart, "The gulf of Naples is yet more intoxicating. Go then. Your enthusiasm will not be diminished, your feelings will soar higher and more eagerly. This is not the hour for solitude, when Italy is in travail with liberty, when Naples awaits the pre-destined one." So in September, 1860, the Muse obeyed the call of the south, and was not disappointed.

Indeed the moment at which she arrived at Naples would have fired colder blood, would have stirred a slower pulse than Mme Colet's. Garibaldi had entered the city on the 6th September. Louise landed on the 9th. On the same day Victor Emmanuel and Cavour started on their march southward to take over the land which Garibaldi had delivered. Their march took seven weeks. For seven weeks Europe held its breath while the troops of Piedmont tramped across the inviolate papal states. For seven weeks there was carnival in Naples. It was a carnival of liberty, when the prisons were opened and the prisoners let loose in the streets, when the tyrant fled and the people swarmed through the deserted palace. It was a carnival of heroism when the pride

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

of the north and the scum of the south marched side by side under the blazing sun to meet an army ten times its size. To meet and to conquer it, pouring out their blood like water on the dry, cracking earth. Above all, it was a carnival of hero-worship. There was but one name on the lips, one figure in the imagination, one image in the heart of the city—Garibaldi. The sunburned bambini in the stinking alleys, the women eternally washing their rags, the gentry in the shady gardens of Sorento and Posilippo, the soldiers on the burning plain, had one subject of conversation—Garibaldi. His lion head, his eagle eye, his red shirt, his floating scarf, became in those seven weeks familiar yet awe inspiring to the citizens of Naples as the smoking peak of their own Vesuvius. When he spoke, the dying soldiers forgot their agonies; when he looked up, the Bourbon mercenaries ceased to fire; when he slept, the centre of the noisiest city in Europe suddenly became “as silent and deserted as the streets of Pompeii.” On the 26th October, Victor Emmanuel drove into the city and took over Garibaldi’s conquests, and on the 9th November the Dictator left for Caprera.

All this Mme Colet saw, and more. She visited the deserted palace and saw the pipes of the late King Bomba, the piano and rosaries of his wife, the spittoons and chocolates of Francis II. She visited

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

the hospitals at Caserta and talked with the wounded soldiers about the battle.

But what interested Louise most was Garibaldi. The city of Venice, the scenes of her childhood, did not stir the Muse more than the Dictator. All other attractions paled before him. It was in vain that Garibaldi went to bed at nightfall and rose before dawn, wandering the mountains alone to avoid pestilent visitors. He might elude the Neapolitans, he could not elude Mme Colet. Cavour himself with all his cunning had not been able to do that. There were only two eminent persons in all Italy who had succeeded in avoiding a conversation with Mme Colet—the Pope and the King. The simple-minded Garibaldi stood no chance. Four times at least he was waylaid by the Muse.

The first encounter took place even before she set foot in Naples. As her boat neared the coast she heard that Garibaldi was coming to inspect the Naval contingent of which it formed a part. "I hastened," says Louise, "to get down into a little boat which drew near that which bore the Dictator. . . . I ordered my boatman to get my boat alongside his, and I gave him the verses which I had written on the occasion of his entry into Palermo. He shook my hand and I said, 'Au revoir, general—if you permit.' At this moment, the artillery

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

salutes were fired from all the ships and cut short my words. My boat was separated from his by a host of others."

She took Garibaldi's silence for consent, and a few days later a stout blue-robed figure armed with introductions hustled up to the sacred fourth story in the Rue de Toledo and was admitted to the presence of the Dictator. She was extremely tactful. "I only said a few very short words to the hero about his personal glory so universal, so splendid and so pure. I knew that this rare great soul was only alive to what concerned his country. (He had never mentioned the verses Louise had addressed to him.) I talked to him about Venice where three weeks before I had been the first to carry the news of his landing at Reggio. Garibaldi listened, attentive and moved by my account of Venice. 'I am glad to have seen you,' he said, 'you did well in coming so soon. In three days I shall not be here. I am going to lay siege to Capua, then I shall go to Rome —later to Venice.'" He did not hear the march of Victor Emmanuel's army.

The next time she saw him was after the battle at Cagazzo. She had been to visit the hospital at Caserta and on returning to the station found that Garibaldi was travelling by the same train. Here again, as on the first occasion of their meeting, Louise exercised great tact. "There was only one

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

first-class carriage on the train," she writes, "and Garibaldi took his seat there. The ticket which I had taken gave me the right to travel by it, but it seemed to me that at this moment he who bore the weight of the destiny of Italy wanted solitude. I felt that it would be respectful to leave him alone, I humbly offered him the bouquet which I was carrying and went and took my seat in a second-class carriage. When the Dictator got out at Maddaloni one of his aides-de-camp came and offered me a seat in the carriage which Garibaldi had left."

Anyhow her virtue was not rewarded. She was only to speak to Garibaldi once more before he left Naples for ever. He was standing in a gallery of the palace where Victor Emmanuel, newly arrived, was holding a reception. "I went up to him," says Louise, "and took his hands between my own and said, 'General, is it true that you are going ?'— 'Yes, in a few days,' he answered.—'No, no,' I replied with a sudden tenderness that choked my words, 'that cannot be.'"

But it was. Garibaldi left Naples a few days later, on November 9, taking with him, as Louise remarked, "all the poetry of the revolution. Everything now seemed flat and dull. My sensitive imagination (*mon imagination de poète*) shared the popular feeling. Royalist Naples had no longer the charm for me of the Naples of Garibaldi." She had

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

seen all the sights. She had been over Pompeii, up Vesuvius in a crinoline and very thin tight boots which were torn to pieces by the stones, and round all the bays of the incomparable coast. The only thing to do was to go off in search of fresh food for the “imagination de poète.” The Muse left for Rome.

Here for the first time she was disappointed. She went to Rome under a misapprehension. It was the common opinion of Garibaldi and all his followers that the fall of Rome would follow immediately the conquest of the south. Mme Colet shared this belief, and so far everything in Italy had turned out exactly as she had prophesied. Now she hastened to Rome in the hope of seeing the triumphant entry of Victor Emmanuel and of performing again her self-imposed functions of “very humble historian to the King.” But she was mistaken. Ten years were to elapse before the Eternal City became the Capital of Italy. The determination of Napoleon III to protect the Pope and Cavour’s determination not to break with Napoleon III were two decisive facts which had escaped the hotter heads on the side of Italian unity. Napoleon III and consequently the Pope had another ten years to live under the hanging sword. It was only after it had fallen on the Emperor in 1870 that Victor Emmanuel felt it safe to lift his hand against the Pope. In

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

the meantime the nationalist victories in the south merely served to alarm and to stiffen the reactionary elements in the Papal States.

So the Muse, fresh from the victories of Garibaldi and the triumphal entries of Victor Emmanuel, arrived in Rome a little out of tune. She had now travelled over practically the whole of Italy crying, “Vive le roi! Vive l’Italie!” “Italia shall be free!” and almost everywhere her cries had been re-echoed with tears of sympathy and gratitude. But in Rome it was different. Her raptures were received with cold annoyance.

Needless to say it did not occur to her to moderate them on that account. With all her faults and follies the Muse was no coward. She rather enjoyed speaking her mind on a subject when every one in the room disagreed with her. Moral courage combined with a complete absence of tact made the Muse a little storm-centre in Rome. One evening at a reception at the French Embassy the Duke — “proposed to introduce me to General Goyon, the commander-in chief and a great supporter of the Papacy. ‘Your Excellency must allow me to refuse,’ I answered, ‘it is enough that I have just made an enemy of General D., by refusing to disown my glorious Italian friends.’—‘It rests with you to avoid these hostilities,’ said the Duke courteously. ‘Forget politics, talk only of art and literature.’—

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

'How can I dissimulate my feelings when I am questioned about them?'—'Keep from me your professions of faith,' he replied. 'They please me by their sincerity. I only see in them a little poetical exaltation, but others might take offence.'"

"The affability and intelligence of the Duke," comments Mme Colet, "illumined with some bright rays the opaque society which surrounded him." But she was incapable of taking his advice. On another occasion she found herself at an evening party in company with four colonels who "knowing my sympathy for an independent Italy became extremely aggressive. They spoke of Garibaldi and Victor Emmanuel as 'filibusters'." Louise defended them so ardently that at last the host intervened and attempted to close the discussion. His "What, more of these burning questions?" being disregarded, he ordered the musicians to strike up. "'You are a heretic,' he said to me laughing, 'and you will get yourself sent away from Rome.'"

And so, as Louise loved to think, it very nearly turned out. One day a Frenchman told her, "A young subaltern in the police to whom I once did a good turn warned me some days ago that you were being watched. You came to Rome immediately after the fall of Gaeta. That put them on your tracks. They think that you are charged with some message, verbal if not written, and on the least

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

pretext they would send you away. At Rome as in Russia distrust those who seek your society.” Louise was delighted. “I laughed at first at the importance they had given to me in thinking that a mission of patriotic propaganda had been entrusted to me,” she says. But when she was alone a delicious wave of self-pity swept over her. Could it be that among the hands which pressed hers every day were those of a traitor, that among the eyes which smiled upon her were those of a spy? No, she put the idea from her “as one spurns with the lips a cup of poisoned water.” But it was a terrible city in which such things could happen, and she quivered with indignation and disgust.

Her disapproval of the political system prevailing in Rome did not prevent her from cultivating those people who were immediately responsible for it. She sought as eagerly for interviews with the Pope and cardinals as with Garibaldi and his staff, or Victor Emmanuel’s ministers. She had a tremendous conversation with Cardinal —, in which she told him her life-history from her birth in a château in Provence down to her experiences in Venice and Naples, including a very full account of her views on the political situation. The cardinal was charming. He sat so close that her full skirts touched his cassock, called her “ma chère,” and listened good-humouredly to her abuse of all that he stood for.

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

But when at parting Louise asked him to arrange an interview with the Pope for her, he began to make difficulties. "I could see from his expression," she says, "that he did not want me to say to the Pope the things that I had just been saying to him."

So Mme Colet reluctantly left Rome without telling his Holiness what she thought of him. Everything seemed against her going. All her friends and acquaintances, even the most reactionary, the very ruins of the Eternal City itself, stretched their heads towards her crying "ne pars-pas." She could not listen, and on May 8, 1861, she returned to Rome to write up her book.

Her book, *L'Italie des Italiens*, is in four closely written volumes, the greater part of which it must be admitted is unreadable. Every museum and picture gallery which Louise visited is described in great detail—with tremendous enthusiasm, of course—but with no particular insight. Louise sees little which the ordinary guide-book writer does not see—but she has not his gift of precision and order. Her descriptions are so rambling, so confused, that no one whose time was of any value would turn to them for information about Italy.

Neither, though she met all the men and women who played any part in the Unification of Italy, has her book any value for the historian. Her descrip-

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

tions of people are generally the merest commonplaces which are already in all the textbooks—as that Garibaldi was “reserved and simple—dressed as always in his red shirt and loose scarf. He carried high,” she goes on, “*sa belle tête inspirée*, and his eyes seemed to look through one.” But she does not often describe celebrities at all except in their relation to herself. The chief things that she tells us about Cavour are that he sent her tickets for the opening of Parliament at Turin—and arranged for her passage on a steamer going to Naples. She devotes about five pages to Manzoni, but they consist almost exclusively of what Louise said to him. The same with Poerio, with the addition that he made an appointment with her in Pompeii and did not keep it.

“*Moi, moi, toujours moi*, is omnipresent in this book or rather in all the books of Mme Colet,” sneers Barbey d’Aurevilly. “It has the feet of an elephant which tread everywhere and crush everything. To mention Leonardo da Vinci is to remind her of herself.”

The thing which he overlooked is that Mme Colet would have been very tiresome about Leonardo—whereas she is extremely entertaining about herself. She writes on this subject with a seriousness, an exaltation, as she would say herself, an “*élan*” which is irresistible. Everything which she does,

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

everything which happens to her, everything about her is so interesting. Her clothes—"Bellissime," exclaims the chamber-maid in Venice, holding up "mon simple robe de poète en voyage,"—her child, the "vierge de quinze ans," who had sat on the knees of so many great men and whose arrival in Italy was greeted by a sonnet from Princess Marie Bonaparte. Even Mme Colet's ill-health became romantic, as is shown by the following description of an attack of neuralgia.

"For a month I had to struggle against agonizing torture; morning and evening I was prostrated by a horrible attack of neuralgic pains, which racked my head, and made me cry out. 'Cry,' I said to the beast (the body), 'but obey, and do my bidding until you drop.' The will, that human instrument which must remain unyielding until death, succeeded in putting me on my feet: at first tottering, supporting myself against the walls, having no other sensation of life than the continuance of my thought. . . . At times my agony was so great that I was tempted to yield to my brutal adversary. What was the use of trying to make of it a servant, or an auxiliary? It would not obey. Then the thought came to me—was I never to see Albano, whose name old Corneille had taught my childish lips to lisp? Castel Fusano with its tranquil sea and its pine forests where wander yet the shades of the two Plinys! Antium with its

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

harbours, Bracciano, Gothic Castle sung by Walter Scott, etc.

"All these places drew me like a mirage. 'Die or live,' I said to the sick beast (*la bête malade*), 'I despise the weight of your burden.' Strong and joyous young people may laugh at this page saying, 'What nonsense! As if the feet ever stumble, or the eyes grow dim, or the hands fall powerless at the side.' Only those who have passed through this deadly conflict, who have wrenched themselves free from the annihilation which threatens to submerge, can understand what it means.

"It was four o'clock before I had vanquished the beast, my brow pale, but illumined by that mysterious triumph of the mind which finds itself again strong and vital."

The poor Muse suffered a good deal from the *bête malade* on this tour. Her search for poetic impressions and high society was constantly interrupted by chills, temperatures, colds. She was one of those sufferers who are constantly complaining about their health, but refuse to take reasonable measures to improve it. She would go to a ball in flat contradiction to the doctor's orders, with a high temperature and a low neck, and tell every one she met that she ought to be in bed. She would insist on climbing to the top of a high tower on a blazing hot day in spite of the combined entreaties of the party, and

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

have to be dragged down hanging on to the arm of the gentlemen "*comme une chose inerte.*" She describes with such relish how Manzoni remarked upon her cough and how Princess Marie Bonaparte stopped the carriage at a chemist's to get her cough-lozenges—that it is difficult to believe that it was entirely a curse to her. But there was no doubt about that cough. Louise had hoped to leave it behind her north of the Alps—but it overtook her in Milan. It was that which in the end whirled her off into that dance of death in which the poor Muse was so reluctant to take her part. But that was not yet. In 1865 she had still more than ten years to live.



## 5: THE END

HAD Louise really belonged to the seventeenth century at the end of her life she would inevitably have become religious. When all chance of repeating the triumphs and follies of her youth were over her sensuous sentimentality would have found nourishment, her humiliation relief, her loneliness companionship in the Catholic Church. But unfortunately for herself, Louise had lived too much in the left wing of the nineteenth century to be able to end her days in the time-honoured refuge of so many frivolous old sinners. However much her temperament might call for it, the thing was impossible for the friend of Alfred de Vigny and Flaubert. Though she could not become devout, in her old age Louise did however become extremely moral.

As she passed her fiftieth year, "l'art" and "le beau" were gradually superseded by "le vrai," "le bien" and "les principes." Her "saisissements d'artiste" became increasingly rare, while her attacks of righteous anger grew more frequent. In fact the last fifteen years of Mme Colet's life were spent in a constant fever of righteous anger. Her restlessness increased, driving her worn and breaking frame

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

“O'er land and ocean without rest.” Her loneliness deepened—in all her journeys now she could not make a new friend or find an old one. So the garrulous old woman swept about the world in a whirlwind in the centre of which was an agonizing loneliness. Her grudge against the world grew more bitter—and as she had no one to talk to, she wrote endless diatribes against the society which had cast her out.

This new phase began with her visit to Rome in 1859. Her disgust at the condition of affairs in the Papal States had been quite genuine though her expression of it in *L'Italie des Italiens* had been marked by all her usual affectation and extravagance. It was naturally enough condemned by the reviewers of several Catholic journals. It then occurred to Louise in some dim subconscious stratum that to annoy was quite as effective a manner of attracting attention as to please, and for a woman of her age—far easier. She redoubled her denunciations. “It is evident,” she writes in 1873, “that in everything that I published in prose or in verse since my first voyage to Italy (1859) blazed forth my conviction, henceforth unshakable, that the Papacy, or not to put too fine a point upon it—that Catholicism would always be an obstacle to the foundation of a stable liberty among the Latin races.”

In 1864 before any stir which her book might have

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

created had entirely died down, Mme Colet returned to Italy. She did not linger this time feasting the artistic temperament in Florence and Venice. She was no longer the "poète en voyage," nor did she attempt to renew her aristocratic acquaintance in Milan and Turin. She was seeking now not friends but enemies, and made straight for Rome. Her friends warned her that she was going into a hostile country and that she would probably be turned out. "But," says Louise, "the idea of danger has never turned me from my path, nor stifled my voice, nor chained my pen." She swept forward to Rome with the express purpose of being turned out.

But she was disappointed. Immediately on her arrival she went to the French Ambassador and asked if he thought she had any chance of being allowed to spend a few days quietly in Rome. His reply was as Louise put it, "coarse and unmannerly." "If you don't make any political outcry no one will take any notice of you. They have plenty of other dogs to beat at the moment." So, to Louise's infinite disgust, it turned out. No one in Rome would persecute her. In vain she warned her hostesses before their parties that "Au premier mot hostile contre mes doctrines, j'éclate." In vain she recited inflammatory verses from her "satire" on Rome. No one treated them seriously. The Abbé Liszt, whom she had abused in *L'Italie des Italiens*,

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

refused to take offence. They met at an evening party, and Louise could extract nothing from him but suave politeness. “It would have been so natural for him to have been barely civil to me,” says Louise pathetically, “that his extreme politeness put me on my guard. I was the enemy of his principles, or rather of his indifference to all principles. I had written a satire on his vanities and affectations. He knew it and refused to take offence.” He attributed Louise’s silence to ill-health and recommended “*je ne sais plus quel élixir d’un couvent de fermes.*” When she said that she had written a satire on Rome with which he would disagree he replied, “*Tout est permis au poète.*” In desperation she mentioned *L’Italie des Italiens*. He had not read it, had not been able to get hold of it—but intended to do so at the earliest opportunity. At parting he held both her hands in his and said he would be delighted if he could be of any service to her in Rome. “‘I desire nothing from Rome but her enmity,’” said Louise coldly, “‘you know quite well that we are in opposite camps,’ and I was going to add, in spite of the pressure of his hands, ‘and you know very well that I have written a sketch of you which you cannot forgive,’ but he interrupted me saying, ‘What does it matter? I am a Christian,’” and giving her hands a final squeeze he glided away before Louise had time to get in her parting shot.

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

Louise waited in Rome a week, a month, two months, but there was no word from the authorities. She visited the museums, picture galleries and ruins till she was tired of them. Still they did not turn her out. At last it became clear that they were never going to. That if Mme Colet was ever to leave Rome it would have to be of her own free will. She was bitterly disappointed. "I had shown, and I shall show yet in my conversation and in my writings, so little respect for that fiction which is called the Papal Government, that this Government had the right to expel me from Rome. But for deep-seated reasons they forbore to exercise it." Therefore in February, 1865, Louise reluctantly left Rome for the South, unexpelled.

Here she was more successful. The hot-headed and artless population of Southern Italy fell into the trap which the wily authorities in Rome had avoided. They took the fulminations of Mme Colet seriously and drove her out with stones and curses first from Ischia, later from Capri. With her usual passion for special permissions, Louise obtained leave from the authorities at Naples to occupy a few rooms of the deserted Bourbon Palace—Palazzo Reale at Ischia. She collected two or three servants' iron beds, a table and a few chairs, "qui suffisent à ma vie stoïque." She chose the large gallery on the first floor "with a little room beside

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

it to work and to sleep "in, the long terrace "to dream and to walk" in, and here with a maid and a boy she settled down for the winter of 1865. In spite of the spaciousness of her quarters and the beauty of the scenery Louise was profoundly unhappy. She had only retired to the solitude of nature because it was less unbearable than the urban solitude which had begun to haunt her in Rome and in Naples or formerly in Paris. Her daughter, who had been married a year or two before, was expecting a baby. Louise would have loved to have been present at the confinement, but there had been a general conspiracy among the relations on both sides to prevent this. The child was born while she was in Ischia and Louise at once wrote and announced her intention of coming home to see it. Henrietta wrote in an unsteady hand reminding her mother that cholera was raging in Europe and forbidding her to risk her precious life by travelling across it. So poor Louise wrote a long poem to the young mother and child and remained where she was.

Nobody wanted her. Louise could not help facing this fact—but instead of shrinking from it she at once embellished it with her own characteristic embroidery. From this time onward she ceases to vaunt her social successes. The friend of poets and princesses, the cynosure of generals and kings, the desired of philosophers and statesmen now speaks

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

of herself as “alone, forgotten, lost—working in spite of the irony and indifference of an inattentive world, in isolation and abandonment.” But apparent failure had its glamour no less than success—the outcast had a mission to fulfil even nobler than that of the days of prosperity. Night after night her solitary lamp burned high up in the palace on the hill, long after all others were extinguished. The fishers far out at sea looked up at it wondering. “What was she doing ?” they asked each other. The light-house marked the reefs, the light in the tower shone over the prisoners. What purpose served the lamp of the Villa Reale—for what mysteries, what incantations ? Why did this woman’s figure linger like a spectre on the high terrace at the hour when all slept ? White under the starry firmament, what spirits did she evoke ? To whom did she turn her eyes and her prayers ? Why did she contemplate without rest the fiery mountain (Vesuvius) where the devil is hidden ? Of what spells was she the hierophant ?

“Ah”—says Louise—“if only it had been given to these poor creatures in their degradation to read the heart of the lonely watcher they would have seen there a profound pity for their misery and degradation and an inextinguishable ardour for truth. To tend the lamp of truth—to sacrifice to it every hour all that one longs for, all that one

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

obtains in the service of error, to feel, to write and to proclaim that honesty and happiness are only possible for man when society based on a sincere morality has rejected political lies, religious lies. To examine scrupulously and boldly all authority, and according to the phrase of the gospel, to judge the tree by its fruits, and if the fruits are bad, corrupt and corrupting, as a workman, humble but patient as the maggot to gnaw without rest the root of the poisoned tree at the risk of being crushed by its fall. Such was the task, the unending labour of the sorceress of the Villa Reale. . . . Whenever I saw evil, hypocrisy, lies, I attacked them at the risk of falling under their weight. When I discover in the shade a vileness, an injustice, a sham, I unmask it. I draw it into publicity and the light of day crying faithfully, ‘Behold ! ’ ”

It was unfortunate though perhaps inevitable that Louise, while in this mood, should discover that the evils which it was her duty to unmask lay thick at her gate. She had not been in Ischia many days before she discovered that two handsome young women whom she had imagined innocent village maidens were not merely prostitutes, but married women who supported husbands and families by their malpractices. Further inquiries revealed that prostitution was almost universal among the married women of the district—and that the priests not

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

merely condoned this state of affairs by giving absolution—but took advantage of it on every possible occasion—debauching young girls and committing adultery with married women. Louise in the fulfilment of her duty of unmasking evil, questioned the servants at the Villa Reale—and as she says, “every one whom I met from the boatmen to the highest officials on the island.” Her indignation and disgust were of course expressed in no unmeasured terms to high and low. Louise was already notorious as being the only person on the island who did not go to Mass. Her righteous anger against the women and priests did not increase her popularity. When in the autumn of 1865 cholera broke out in Naples vague dislike turned to hatred and fear. The approach of the danger threw the excitable, unstable southerners into a panic. The priests, either preying on the general ignorance, superstition and panic, or themselves sharing it, made it positively dangerous by treating the plague as a scourge sent from God, whose anger could only be appeased by the punishment of the impious.

One evening in December an official called on Louise and besought her on behalf of the mayor to leave the island. A resident returning from the mainland with two bottles of anti-cholera mixture had been attacked by the furious populace on the ground that he was going to poison the whole island.

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

There were at least 300 men armed and out of control on the island, and if a case of cholera were to break out they would be certain to wreak their vengeance on Mme Colet. The mayor for the sake of her safety and his own besought her to return at once to Naples.

Louise was delighted. Here at last was the persecution which she had awaited in vain at Rome. She dispatched three servants for the colonel of the militia, the doctor and the mayor himself. They arrived pale and trembling to hear her decision and to beseech her to depart. Louise was adamant. Nothing would induce her to leave the island at the bidding of superstition and ignorance. She ordered the mayor to telegraph at once to Naples for soldiers to protect her. In vain he protested that he could not telegraph to Naples, that he reported to the sub-prefect at Pozzioli and that the utmost he could do would be to telegraph to *him* for help. Louise regarded this as inadequate and herself wrote telegrams to the prefect at Naples, to the French Consul, and to some influential friends in Naples. The telegraph office was shut that night, however, so she was forced to wait for the morning to dispatch them.

When her trembling visitors had gone Louise retired to her room for the night. A storm was raging, beating against the windows, howling round

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

the doors of the deserted palace. Physical fear, Louise tells us, was unknown to her. Her only anxiety was for her daughter. She took out her portrait and sat gazing, she tells us, "at the dear picture of my only child. I told myself that her frail constitution, still weak from her recent confinement, might be shattered by the news of the peril which threatened me." The next morning her courage was high. "I had breakfast," she says, "as usual. I performed my toilet like a true Parisienne who intends to die well dressed, well groomed and without being unattractive even to death itself. As I put in the last pin I heard cries at the end of the garden. It was the inhabitants shouting their curses at the sorceress of the Villa Reale on their way home from Mass." Louise questioned the servants about it, but to her annoyance they said that they had seen or heard nothing that morning, that what their mistress had taken for curses was merely the sound of the sea and the wind. Anyhow the noises soon died away as by magic and once again silence reigned in the Villa Reale. At 3.15 in the afternoon, however, the door was suddenly flung open and the maid announced, "The sub-prefect of Pozzioli, the Mayor of Ischia and the colonel of the Militia."

"I held out my hand," says Louise, "to M. Lucio Florentini of Brescia, the sub-prefect of Pozzioli, a brave patriot, a convinced publicist and a poet flying

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

to the assistance of another poet. At the first news of my danger, without even waiting for the authority of the prefect of Naples, he had leapt into a boat with his secretary, and at the risk of being drowned had braved the stormy sea. The tempest had been so strong that the fifty carabineers whom he had ordered to accompany him had not been able to embark until nightfall." They arrived the next day, and were received by a riot which was easily quelled. Sixty natives were taken prisoner but were released the next day. Mme Colet's life was saved.

A day or two later a case of cholera was reported in Ischia. This, together with the charm of the sub-prefect, and a letter from the prefect of Naples advising Mme Colet to leave a place "which is no longer without danger to her person," accomplished what the threats of the populace and the entreaties of the mayor had been unable to achieve. Mme Colet remembered her daughter and returned to the mainland in the same boat as the charming M. Florentini.

In the following spring she visited Capri, and continued her researches into public morals, gathering material for her next book, *The Courtisans of Capri*. Here again she seems to have incurred the popular displeasure and—exactly under what circumstances we do not know—have been forced

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

to leave the island. After a few weeks in Rome she returned to Paris. It was only then that she discovered the cruel revenge which the priests had taken upon her. They had stolen some of her manuscripts. It had happened in Rome as she was on her way back. A tall old man used to come every day to the office of the hotel on the pretext of inquiring the number of visitors in the hotel. "I was warned," writes Louise, "that this man, who had spoken to me several times, was an employé of the Roman police. I attached no importance to this information, imagining that my life of sickness and of solitude would save me from all surveillance. On the evening of my departure I packed my trunks, and the litter of papers in my little room was such that I did not notice that among these manuscripts, several of which were wrapped in newspaper, one packet was missing." Mme Colet travelled in a special compartment reserved for her by the chief railway engineer. She had special permits enabling her to pass the customs without opening her trunks. Yet when she reached Paris she found the packet was missing. It must therefore have been stolen in Rome. There could be only one explanation. The tall old man had come into her bedroom at the hotel "*pendant une promenade d'adieu que je faisais au Forum.*" Louise of course left no stone unturned in her efforts to recover the precious manuscripts.

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

She wrote to the French and Italian papers giving an exact description of them. She wrote to all the prominent Italians of her acquaintance—not excepting Garibaldi—begging their assistance. It was no use, the papers were never restored. The Catholic Church had taken its revenge.

But after all there was no need to go to Rome to find the enemy. There were plenty of vices to denounce, plenty of evils to bring to light, plenty of prostitutes, plenty of clergy in France. Mme Colet now turned her attention to her own country. “From 1861-69,” she writes in 1873, “I never ceased to deplore and to denounce the twofold cause of the decline of France—clerical education and the corruption of the Empire.”

The evils of clerical education were denounced in *Les Dévots du Grand Monde*—a collection of articles and stories devoted to the crimes and follies of religious people. There is the story of the young provincial lady who left her husband keeping prostitutes and drinking in the village inn, while she travelled from one shrine to another with three abbés in her wake, praying the Virgin for a child. There are stories of actresses who covered their indiscretions by a veil of false piety, of vulgar women who pushed their way into the highest society by the good offices of worldly priests. There are stories of murderers who, putting “le marque de la dévotion

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

sur la visage du crime," pray to God above the death-rattle of their innocent victims.

With regard to the corruptions of the Empire, a curious change takes place in Mme Colet's views about 1860. She who had formerly been noted as "une des femmes le mieux coiffées de Paris," whose collection of cosmetics had been phenomenal, who had earned her living by persuading others to buy expensive hats and costumes, now became the sworn enemy of luxury of any kind. One of her fiercest satires holds up to ridicule a lady dressed as Mme Colet herself generally was ten years earlier, "in a *desbabillé* of white muslin trimmed with lace," and seated as the former Mme Colet had generally been, "before her dressing-table with a mirror in her hand." Her bath is filled with filtered water mixed well with eight litres of milk and six kilogrammes of crushed strawberries. She spends the morning in gossiping with her dressmaker, from whom she orders a gown for a thousand francs and some face-cream made of ground opals and rubies, for another thousand. *Ces Petits Messieurs*, as its name suggests, deals principally with male extravagances. On the frontispiece is shown an elegant masculine figure with curled hair and microscopic feet seated before a dressing-table which groans beneath its load of pomades, brushes, scents, and cosmetics. In his left hand he holds a mirror while with his right he applies

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

a large powder-puff to an emasculated cheek. This is the typical “petit Monsieur” whose vices and follies were ruining France. “They begin the day,” says Louise, “with a perfumed bath, and cut their hair themselves for fear that a less skilful hand should spoil the effect. They would rather lose their mother than see it turn grey or come out. They would rather that all Paris were destroyed than that their teeth (every day scraped and enamelled) should decay. They rouge their cheeks, darken their eyebrows, paint their lips,” etc. etc. “What is the remedy for this corruption,” asks Louise in a glowing passage at the end. “There is only one—work—let us have hands horny, but free from stain, the head bowed beneath the load it carries, never by shame. No more tinsel, no more gilt, no more showy titles and decorations, no more impostors’ disguises—but the real distinctions of an unchallengeable virtue and goodness. The body fasting, the soul incessantly fed.” Louise intended to follow up this theme by *La France Enervée*, and *La France Sinistre*. They remained in the limbo which had engulfed the *Courtisans of Capri*. In 1869 she set out on the longest and last of her foreign travels.

In the end of that year, to quote her own words, “The opening of the Suez Canal focused all imaginations upon Egypt, whither from all parts of the world hastened the savants, writers, artists, who

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

were worthy to applaud and understand a genius at once persevering and practical. The prodigious task of the reunion of two seas, for so long declared impossible, was at last accomplished, thanks to the iron will of one single man.” Louise forgot her stoic principles and her righteous anger in a sudden gush of her old enthusiasm. She was eager as a child not to miss the fête, and with all her old genius for wire-pulling managed to procure herself a ticket. The journey out was not altogether a success. None of the “savants, writers and artists” with whom the boat was crowded were anxious to make or to renew the acquaintance of Mme Colet. “The majority belonged to the imperialist faction,” says Louise, “and were astonished to see me among the small number of liberal writers invited to this fête of the intelligentsia.” Theophile Gautier who had been an assiduous visitor in the Rue de Sèvres in the old days would have cut her dead if she had not button-holed him. Of all her literary friends and acquaintances no one offered her a seat on the crowded deck. Louise of course was not daunted. “I seated myself laughing on the boards,” she tells us, “and leant against my travelling-case full of salts and cordials.” It was no laughing matter though really. She was a pathetic figure, she who had once been Flaubert’s “pauvre ange adorée.”

Still, even now her extraordinary vitality asserted

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

itself, and after the opening ceremony was over, Louise made a tremendous oriental tour, swept on by all her old enthusiasm. "For ten months," she writes, "I was intoxicated by the beauties of nature in the most splendid countries of the world, upper and lower Egypt, Sicily, Calabria, Athens, Constantinople. I contemplated the most beautiful works of art," etc. etc. She was in Constantinople when the Franco-Prussian war broke out. As in Italy, she at once prophesied the truth. "From the first day," she writes, "I was stunned by the presentiment of our misfortunes. I wept in anticipation of the dreadful *certainty*. So much that on the borders of that Asia where Cassandra prophesied my friends at Constantinople called me, with a touch of irony, 'the French Cassandra.' Several of them were rich bankers who had invested all their money in France. I can hear them now, saying to me, as blow after blow the bulletins of our defeat came to confirm my terrible prophecies, 'Oh, how right you were. If only we had listened to you we should not now be ruined.'" "But what was their ruin to me," she asks, "beside the tragedy of France? I felt for her at that moment those passionate transports of tenderness which one feels for a dying mother. Ill though I was I felt that I must start at once." As she left Constantinople on September 5, the newsboys were calling

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

in a dozen languages, “Capitulation at Sedan, fall of the Empire, proclamation of the Republic.”

At Milan her old friends tried to turn her from her path pointing out the danger and discomforts which awaited her. “But,” says Louise, “France was dying, the mother was calling her children,” and she swept on. She found Geneva “full of French refugees, abandoning France in the hour of her disaster.” One of them accosted her. “‘So you have come here, too. Were you afraid of the anarchy which is destroying our poor France?’” “‘Pardon me,’ I replied, ‘make no mistake, you have left France, I am returning to her.’” An hour later she was travelling northward. At Marseilles, Esquiros, an official of strong Republican sympathies, allowed her to address a large gathering of the women of Marseilles. “For the first time in my life,” says Louise, “I tasted the intoxication reserved for the orator.” Her subject was “patriotism first, then an attack on the clerical spirit and superstitions which at Marseilles as in almost all France stifle the love of country in the hearts of its women.” At the close of her speech many young and charming ladies threw their arms round her neck, while the working women rushed on to the platform crying, “*Ordonnez, nous obéirons.*” The Catholic papers, however, gave a very unfavourable report of her speech. They objected, among other things, to

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

her having expressed a desire to see the Pope, Napoleon III and Bismarck shut up in one cage devouring one another. The bourgeoisie took alarm and her subsequent meetings were not so well attended. A violent attack of bronchitis soon put an end to further meetings and confined her to her room for three months. In spite of all her efforts and her impatience, she did not reach Paris till the beginning of March, 1871.

Her arrival was gloomy. She found no preparations had been made for her return. Her flat was shut up. Her servant and acquaintances expressed astonishment at seeing her. They had heard she was dead. Her enemies the Catholic priests had inserted a notice in their organ "L'Univers" to the effect that Mme Colet had died in Marseilles of an ulcer on the tongue, the judgment of Heaven for her blasphemous speeches. Louise, of course, wrote to the papers contradicting the rumour, and pointing out its source. But she had been, and still was, too near death altogether to enjoy the sensation.

With her extraordinary journalist's flair for the right moment, she arrived home on March 10, exactly a week after the Germans had left Paris, and a week before the declaration of the Commune. The situation was gloomy enough to justify her most Cassandra-like forebodings. Never since the days when the Capets bought off the Norman

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

pirates had Paris been so near extinction. For the last five months Paris had been besieged by the Prussians. For five months her streets had re-echoed to the roar of Prussian guns—her houses had crashed under Prussian shells, her soldiers had fallen riddled with Prussian bullets. For five months her citizens had lived in terror, cold and hunger. The finest chefs in Europe had cooked horses, dogs, rats, and epicures had eaten them greedily. For months the poor had lived on nameless filth and horror—then they had begun to die of hunger. Then the months of agony had been declared useless and Paris had capitulated to the Prussians. For the first three days of March the enemy had occupied Paris, the citizens silent and, as de Goncourt said, all pale as if with serious illness, had stared at the Prussian soldiers. On March 3, 1871, the peace treaty had been signed and the Prussians had marched east—leaving Paris stunned and broken to count her losses. But worse was to come. On March 18 the Commune was declared, and there was civil war in Paris. For six weeks the Communists held the city while the Republican army from Versailles broke in wave after wave against it. The horrors of the Prussian war were almost forgotten in the horrors of the civil war. French blood flowed faster at the barricades than at Sedan. Then, on May 24 the Republican army broke into the city,

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

and the bourgeoisie took vengeance on the proletariat which had defied them. It was bad to be old in those days. There were few of Flaubert's generation whose life was not shortened, whose death was not darkened by the horrors of 1870-1.

Louise's sympathies were all for the Commune, but she was too old and broken by this time to take any very active part in it. Once or twice she ventured into the streets to spit at the priests and soldiers of the bourgeoisie, but she was soon driven in again by the rain of bullets, and the cruel sights which made the streets horrible in those days. The greater part of her activity was confined to the writing of pamphlets and petitions.

De Goncourt passing through the streets in April saw her signature at the head of a petition of communist women. But even this mild form of activity could be too much for her now. In the summer she was again seriously ill, or, as she puts it herself : "I had cried mercy and peace until the moment when my voice failed in my throat, when my heart, which had throbbed with all the agonies of France, grew cold." She was sent into the country to recover—far from this Paris, burning and terrible, which devours the body and consumes the soul with the blind indifference of a volcano.

She was taken in by some young married people who seem to have treated her with great kindness.

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

Louise does not give their names nor say what her connexion with them was. It seems probable that they were near relations, perhaps her daughter and her son-in-law. Anyhow, they were moved by some strong sense of duty, some compelling pity or generosity to take in and care for the sick and lonely old woman whom no one else wanted, of whose past they disapproved, and with whose views they were entirely out of sympathy. Yet in spite of their efforts for her comfort, Louise was very unhappy. Years of striving and agitation, late hours, unsatisfactory love affairs, neglected colds and constant travelling had at last done their work. Though she was not much over sixty Louise's vigorous constitution was at last completely battered and broken. She was not exaggerating now when she spoke of herself as dying. Yet she had still that agonizing desire to live, not merely passively but actively, to be some one, to count for something, to give and receive affection, to advise, to direct and control which is the bane of old age. The description of this part of her life has a genuine pathos. One afternoon she sat propped up in an arm-chair in the garden while the pretty children of her hostess played round her chair. "I caught them in my arms," she says, "and gave them kisses into which I put all my heart. They returned them with the fleeting tenderness of childhood. Yielding to the

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

desire to caress them and make them love me, I continued to call them, but they ceased to answer me, and they soon forgot I was there. Their mother, young, beautiful and happy, was romping with them." The children, like the philosophers, poets, and artists, had grown tired of Mme Colet, and she sat a wistful spectator of that domestic happiness which had once seemed so bourgeois and dull.

But the years with all their bitterness had taught her little. She had no more tact than in the old days when she quarrelled with Mme Dupin, got on Flaubert's nerves and published Benjamin Constant's private correspondence. She knew that the people whose hospitality she had accepted were entirely bourgeois and reactionary in their sympathies. Yet this did not prevent her from preaching the communist cause in season and out. The hostess grew a little restive, and sharp words ensued one afternoon when Louise burst into floods of, it must be admitted, slightly ostentatious tears, over a list of the proscribed. The discussion was put to an end characteristically by Louise, who suddenly became motionless and dumb. "I made no sound, save a heavy groan, only in my eyes blazed my reproof. The young woman returned to her children. I got up and shut myself up in my room." Poor Louise, it was a barren victory. "I astonished my hosts,"

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

she observes, " by my preoccupation with the public griefs. I understood that I should soon become positively repulsive to them, a sort of monstrosity troubling their peace. I returned the next day to Paris carrying one grief the more in my heart. I wept at leaving this house where I had hoped to find the sympathy which would have given me the power to forget and the desire to live. But, seeing that they watched me go without emotion, perhaps even with a sort of relief, I forced back my tears. 'Keep them,' I said to myself, 'for those who are suffering and abandoned.' As one advances in life," she adds pathetically, " one has no more illusions as to the sentiments which one inspires." She might well weep. She had alienated the last of her friends. It was clear now that she would have to die alone.

On her return to Paris she was again seriously ill. This time it was an abscess in the head necessitating a dangerous and agonizing operation. Still Louise did not die. She not merely lived, she clung to life. She had nothing to live for save herself, but that was enough—in a passion of self-love Mme Colet still clung to Mme Colet. Old, ugly, ill, generally disliked, and abandoned, she was dear and interesting to her last admirer as in the days when she was young, beautiful, sought after, full of vitality. She loved to talk and think of herself,

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

her virtues, her courage, her sufferings, her doctors, "the two grave physicians who disputed me with death." Her mind does not seem to have taken at the end the usual turn backwards to the past. Her egotism was too complete. She lived now as always in the present—as interesting to herself at the end of her life as at any other part of it. The last two years were spent in a curious kind of valetudinarianism. It was not of the crude variety, where an interest in temperature charts, sleeping draughts, and water mattresses almost reconciles the sufferer to the continuance of his sufferings, and takes the place of the wealth and variety of the real world from which he is cut off. Mme Colet's valetudinarianism was of a higher order. It consisted, as she said, "in a prolonged and relentless duel between the mind which soars (*l'idée qui plane*) and matter which tries to drag it down." In vain her doctors ordered her complete rest of mind and body. Louise laughed in their faces, accusing them of materialism. She gave the reins to her spirit. "At once impetuous and patient," she tells us, "it forced the sick body to obey. As a result of disregarding the body, I have almost become a mind without a body. My voice trembles, my legs are unsteady, my face is pale and emaciated, but in spite of this bodily decay I feel my mental and spiritual power increasing. I continue my health-giving treatment (*mon vivifiant*

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

*régime*) to the great alarm of my two dear doctors, the one a physician and the other a surgeon." Had the teaching of Mrs. Baker Eddy reached Paris by 1873 Louise would certainly have embraced it and dismissed the two dear doctors instead of merely disobeying them. But it was still confined to Boston, and Louise found other sources of comfort.

She had hardly recovered from her operation when she was prostrated by a fresh attack of bronchitis. The two doctors forbade her to spend the winter in Paris and in the autumn of 1873 she went to San Remo. Here, Louise was to spend the next two years, nearly all that remained to her of life, alone in sea-side lodgings. Her rooms were on the sea front, but in a cheap and squalid end of the town. From her window she could see the old fort which was used as a prison, and day after day bands of wretched pickpockets, card-sharpers, vagabonds of all kinds, the scum of the luxurious cities of the Riviera, were led in chains past her window, followed by filthy little beggars. A pierrot company had their station almost opposite her window, and when it was fine the relentless bawling of comic songs and the twanging of banjos filled the sick-room. But most often in the early days it rained. True, the climate was milder than that of Paris, but for the first winter and spring it was relentlessly wet. The Mediterranean was grey and stormy as

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

the North Sea, and day after day the rain beat against the rattling windows, the wind shook the flimsy little lodging-house. But Louise's cup was full when she discovered that the house next door was an undertaker's, and that the banging which kept her awake at night and woke her early in the morning was produced by the nailing down of coffins. Time after time the sound of wheels outside brought her to the window in the hope of seeing a cab bring some friendly figure of an old acquaintance who had found out her retreat and come to visit her. It was only a hearse come to fetch its hateful burden from next door. There were days when Louise could hardly bear to look out of the window for fear of what she might see. It was little wonder that she could not sleep. Racked with her cough, tortured by her unbearable loneliness, Louise lay awake night after night listening to the howling of the wind, the banging at the coffins.

Then suddenly in her extraordinary way she found relief. A parcel of new books sent by her publisher in Paris contained Edgar Quinet's *L'Esprit Nouveau*. Louise pounced upon it. Its lofty generalizations, its vague platitudes, its righteous anger with the world in general, revealed the kindred spirit for which her soul had been longing for years. She read the book through in one night. She experienced a moral exaltation stronger than any of her earlier

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

“saisissements d’artiste.” In her own words : “ From the opening pages of this magnificent work I felt a delicious emotion, as I continued my reading my rapture (*ravissement*) increased, it was one of those perfect spiritual joys only comparable to the radiant joys of youth, when the dream long caressed in secret but considered impossible suddenly becomes a reality by the participation (*assentiment*) of another soul, sincere and strong. ‘ Happiness exists, behold I bring it you,’ cries this soul. It is an even higher satisfaction that the intellect experiences in seeing confirmed by genius the doctrines of the new faith, the inward flame which burns in oneself and over which one has watched anxiously, to guard it against the attacks now ferocious, now insidious of imposture. This is the virile consolation which this sublime book brought me, this the imperishable Bible of science, the creed of truth, sprung luminous from the brain of a man who was at once one of the most profound thinkers, and one of the greatest writers of this century. I drank without taking breath at this pure stream. As I read the last lines the dawn broke. I felt an ineffable calm. The rapture of admiration (*saisissement de l’admiration*) had suddenly stopped my coughing fits which had been till then uncontrollable.” In fact, a miracle had been accomplished. Her cough grew better, her sleep returned, and within a week she was able to “ talk,

## A L A D Y   O F   T H E   S A L O N S

write and walk—little by little to take hold of life again."

Her obvious course was to write and thank her benefactor. With all the promptitude and ardour of the days when the "Académie Française had crowned her poems, Louise wrote a passionate letter of gratitude to Quinet (she had met him once in Brussels twenty years earlier), telling him of her admiration for his book and its almost miraculous effects upon herself. Of course, Quinet could not resist it. What author of a newly-published book could resist such a letter? He wrote back imploring her to take care of her health and to complete the cure he had begun. Louise replied with some observations about Greece and Rome which had occurred to her during a feverish attack. Quinet wrote back telling her how well his book was selling. A correspondence was fairly launched.

Then, like all Mme Colet's correspondences, it came to an abrupt end. One stormy evening she read in a paper newly arrived from Paris of the death of Edgar Quinet. "The paper," she tells us, "shook in my trembling hands. The beating of my pulse and the throbbing of my head became so rapid that it seemed as if my veins must snap like the strings of an instrument stretched to breaking point. My eyes grew dim, and feeling that I was going to faint, I clung to the furniture as I staggered

## A LADY OF THE SALONS

towards the bed. I fell upon it prostrated by a high fever. When the day broke they sent for the doctor. His order of absolute calm and repose wrung from me a sad smile. As if it was likely that one could control *such* an emotion and resign oneself to the rupture of *such* a tie. Their unintelligent remedies failed. From that day I have been the victim of a nervous fever." There was nothing left but to write an account of the whole correspondence, including copies of most of the letters, to the periodical which would be most likely to publish it. This happened to be the Italian liberal paper, *Rappel*. In a burning passage at the end Louise addresses the editor : "Translate, distribute and preach at Rome *L'Esprit Nouveau*. Oh, young and courageous poet, do not scorn this mission. This is the last cry of a dying woman."

The strange thing is that it really was. Louise wrote no more after this. She just had strength to return to Paris at the end of 1875. On March 8, 1876, she died. Thirty years earlier she would have been missed and regretted by a large circle of eminent men and women. Fifteen years earlier many would have heaved a sigh of relief at the news. But in 1876 it was received with complete indifference. Maxime du Camp made a few casual and spiteful remarks about her, and states where she was buried. Otherwise nothing is known of her

## A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S

death. It is not known what new poses she invented to beguile or placate the approaching enemy, nor when she laid them aside. Did she meet death as she said a Parisian should, "Well dressed, well groomed, not repulsive even to Death himself." Or did he compel her to lay down her arms early in the struggle? There must have been one or two paid attendants, kindly neighbours, or dutiful relatives who saw Louise Colet at one supreme moment as she really was, stripped of every affectation. But they never told. They left her her pose to face an indifferent posterity.

## Bibliography

BARBEY D'AUREVILLY. "Les Bas Bleus," 1860-95.  
"Rhythms oubliés," 1859.

BARTHELEMY, SAINT HILAIRE. "Victor Cousin," 1895.

CHAMBON, F. "Deux Amours d'un Philosophe," in "Annales Romantiques," 1904.

COLET, LOUISE. "Ces Petits Messieurs," 1869.  
"Edgar Quinet," 1875.  
"La Verité sur l'Anarchie des Esprits en France," 1873.  
"Les Derniers Abbés," 1868.  
"Les Dévots du Grand Monde," 1873.  
"Les Pays Lumineux," 1871.  
"Lui," 1859.  
"L'Italie des Italiens," 1862-4.  
"Poésie."  
"Quarante-cinq Lettres de Béranger," 1859.  
"Réponse aux Guépes de M. A. Karr," 1869.

CONSTANT, BENJAMIN. "Lettres à Mme Récamier," 1882.

A L A D Y O F T H E S A L O N S  
DE COMBREMONT, J. MESTRAL. "La belle Mme  
Colet," 1913.

DE MIRECOURT. "Histoires Contemporaines," 1867.

DU CAMP, MAXIME. "Souvenirs Littéraires," Vol.  
II, 1882-3.

FLAUBERT. "Correspondance," 1830-59.

LENORMANT. "Mme Récamier," 1872.

MARTELET. "De Musset Intime," 1906.

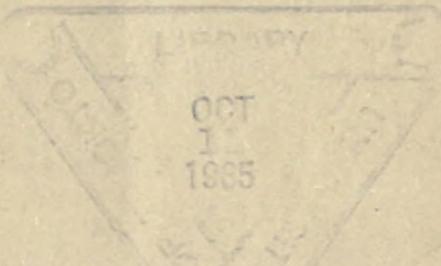
SÉCHÉ. "De Musset," Vol. II, 1907.

SIMON, JULES. "Victor Cousin," 1887.

TREVELYAN, G. M. "Garibaldi and the Thou-  
sand," 1909.



See also huzi Coppola in nuova  
Antologia March 1958 (pp. 341-354)  
"Suzan(sic) Horner, Louise Colette  
Alo Poerio" (Louise Colette's letters  
to Poerio)  
Her letters to Louis Bonifacé (1968)



**PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE  
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET**

---

---

**UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY**

---

